

Breathe Again by UntilDawnClimbingClass

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Summary:

AU in which Steve is the rich new kid who's not accepted nor welcome with open arms by the other kids in school.

Jonathan is the weird outsider who saves Steve in more ways than one.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Don't ask me where this idea came from. I just wanted to write something different for this fandom and I was intrigued by the idea of Steve moving to Hawkins and being considered an outsider despite his social status.

What's crippling is when there are certain people you expected to be around for a long, long time, and when suddenly they aren't anymore it's almost as if the darkest night doesn't ever fade to light again.

The sky isn't as blue as it used to be, and the roaring storm isn't so distant anymore.

Everything you always thought was good and perfect isn't, and suddenly you can't even breathe.

Steve Hardington knows this, because *this* is that moment.

Everything is new, and nothing is okay.

Torrents of rain fell from the darkest shade of gray he's ever seen attached to a sky line, soaking everything not protected by four walls and a ceiling.

How fitting, he thinks bitterly.

Thunder loud enough to shake foundation crashed somewhere in the distance, sending animals and young children both into frenzies.

How fitting.

Steve is stuck outside in the rain, the thunder, the lightning, viciously pulling bags from the back of the Cadillac.

He doesn't want to be here.

He wants to be home.

Steve still can't figure out why his parents had to chosen to move to Indiana—of all places—other than they wanted to. His happiness was an unfortunate fatality. They dragged him, for no good reason, to a small town where everyone knows one another because that's how fucking small it is.

He feels alone.

“*You’ll just love it here!*” He mocks his mother’s words under his breath. “Love it here my ass.” *I hate it already.*

Back where he used to live, he was *Steve Harrington*, the popular kid. Everyone knew him and all the guys wanted to be him. All the girls just *wanted* him. He never had to worry about being the new kid because he lived there his whole life. He was the goddamn *king*.

But he’s the new kid now, and he finally understands what people mean when they say it’s not easy by any means.

Everyone always looks at you strangely, especially when the area is a small one.

The girls stare at him in appreciation. That’s not unusual.

What is unusual is the guys making rude comments under their breath and mocking him and his hair as he walks by, clearly not impressed with him—and maybe even a little jealous that their girls are looking at *him*. It hadn’t been like that back home. He hadn’t been liked by everyone, but his school had been filled with rich kids like himself, and all the rich kids hung together.

There are no rich kids here.

He’s an invader.

An outsider.

An outcast.

It's unfortunate that, being the new kid with nice clothes and a nice car, he's forced under this label the moment he walks through the doors.

2. Chapter 2

“New kid!”

Steve turns in response, looking almost defiantly at the boy walking straight towards him. For a second he's afraid that he's going to get into a fight before he even gets his schedule. But he doesn't throw any punches, he just walks into Steve's personal space and crosses his arms.

“You're in my way,” he growls.

Steve opens his mouth to speak, to tell this douchebag off.

But this is his first day and he hasn't even gotten his schedule yet. There will be time for fighting later.

So he snaps his mouth shut and moves aside.

The asshole smirks and keeps going.

He has a feeling that was just a *taste* of how he's going to be treated around here.

Fortunately new kids also have privileges.

Like being allowed to be late to their classes for the first few days without penalty.

So he has no qualms walking into his first period class twenty-five minutes late, on purpose, because he'd rather smoke a cigarette or two in his car before having to deal with this bullshit. He barely even quirks an eyebrow upon reading what's written on the blackboard.

“POP quiz, huh?”

“Nice of you to do all join us, Mr. Harrington. You have twenty minutes.”

Privileges my ass.

The first five multiple choice questions or so went easy enough, the next five made him think, but by the eleventh or twelfth question he almost throws his pencil at the front of the classroom. He settles for a loud, frustrated sigh and shoves a hand in his hair while quickly looking around the room to gauge the status of the other students.

And then he sits there, ignoring his test in favor of big brown eyes that stare back at him.

“Five minutes remaining.”

“Sonuva—“

And this how his first big red **F** of the school year is earned.

“Hey new kid!”

Steve sighs and drops his head into his locker, hoping there’s another new kid that the voice is calling for. But he hasn’t been lucky in a while, so of course it’s him who’s space is suddenly invaded by a bigger guy who’s probably on the football team or something.

“You a queer?”

Steve blinks, confused. “Am I a—*Huh?*”

“I saw you and Byers staring at one another like a couple of fags.”

“Uh...Who?”

“First period, dumbass.”

Oh.

Him.

How the hell was he gonna explain this one?

"I wasn't—No, I'm not—I'm not queer."

"Better not be. We don't like *faggots* around here." The guy stalks past him, bumping his shoulder against Steve's as he does so.

Well, he guesses he won't be making friends with that guy anytime soon.

"I don't understand any of this," Steve groans, placing his face firmly on the textbook. "I don't even need this. When the hell am I ever gonna need this crap?"

"You will if you become an astrophysicist," came a soft voice from above him, so he glances up from under an awkward shelf of hair into the same pair of brown eyes that got him that **F** that got him stuck in this library in the first place.

"Or, I mean, when you retake the test," the boy continues with a small shrug.

"What the hell is an astroph—? Never mind. Who are you?"

The boy places his bag down and takes a seat across from Steve. "Your new tutor."

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

Just wanted to say that this is my first time writing for this fandom AND these characters so if anyone seems OOC, I apologize. It's gonna take me some time getting used to writing them so the dialogue probably isn't perfect, but hopefully satisfying enough.

Thanks for reading!

Byers is his tutor?

Well, this is just great.

"What grade did you get?"

"A ninety."

"A ninety?!" Steve says loudly, earning him a glare from the librarian. "How?! You spent the whole time staring at me!"

Nice one, Harrington.

Byers freezes.

"Why *were* you staring at me?" Steve leans back against his seat and crosses his arms.

Byers shakes his head, looking highly uncomfortable and a little embarrassed. "I-I wasn't staring at you. You kept looking at me, and —"

"Yeah, 'cause you were looking at me."

"Look, I—" Byers takes a deep breath and looks down at his own textbook. "Can we just get started? We've already wasted enough time."

He doesn't look at Steve again the entire time.

"Hey, sweetie, how was your first day of school?" His mother asks as she rushes over to give him a kiss.

Politely, he waits until she's no longer looking before he wipes his face, but he doesn't answer her. He doesn't know how to, even as she moves back to continue cooking dinner but glances up expectantly at him. He doesn't know what she wants to hear.

"Steve?"

Well, for starters, I failed my first test.

"Is everything okay?"

I can't believe you made me move to this shithole.

"Yeah...Yeah. Everything's fine. Today was...great."

She doesn't need to know.

Steve isn't very religious.

He's not sure what the hell he believes in.

But, whatever it was, he hopes it involves something like heaven.

"I, uh...I hope you're resting okay," he says at night to the picture he has in his hands. "I hope you're not in pain anymore...That you're okay."

I love you.

"I miss you."

Even in death he can't say it.

“Hey new kid!”

For Christ sake.

“You should really cut your hair. You look like a chick.”

Awesome.

Just what he needs.

He’s late for tutoring.

Byers—Jonathan, he finally learned—isn’t going to be happy with him.

And he sees the scowl on the other boy’s face when he notices Steve walking up to the table, so Steve says, “Sorry I’m late, man. You see, what happened was that the monkeys invaded again and I needed to fight them off with my super kung-fu grip. You’re welcome.”

Because who can stay mad at an excuse like that?

Jonathan cracks a smile—a small one, but a smile nonetheless. Steve feels oddly proud of himself. He hasn’t seen Jonathan smile since he’s started here.

“So they made you to tutor me?”

Jonathan kind of looks up at him, but shakes his head. “No.” He doesn’t say anything else, just continues doing his homework, expecting Steve to do the little worksheet he gave him.

It’s just to help me see what you know so far and what you need to work on, he had explained when Steve had given him a look.

“Then why—“

“I volunteered.”

“To tutor?”

“You’re new here. I just...wanted to help you out.”

Steve refuses to admit that it’s actually kind of nice.

“Listen, you may not want me as a tutor, but if you don’t want to flunk this entire year you’re going to have to deal with it and start paying attention.”

Steve never said he doesn’t want him as a tutor.

“They’re not going to flunk me,” he scoffs. He’s not doing *that* terrible.

“Steve, you’re not in New York anymore. Things are different here.”

Steve stares.

Jonathan stares back.

Steve realizes he isn’t joking.

“They’ll flunk me? Seriously?”

Jonathan just looked at him.

“Shit.”

“Hey new kid!”

He can’t figure out why people can’t leave him alone.

He just wants to smoke his cigarette in peace.

“You’re Steve, right?”

Steve debates not answering.

“Sorry. You’re...busy.”

She sounds dejected.

Now he feels bad.

“No, sorry, I was just...Uh, what’s your name?”

“Nancy Wheeler.”

“Cute name.” Cute girl.

4. Chapter 4

“Steve!”

Steve glances up, bangs plastered to his forehead. He squints his eyes to see who it is through the downpour.

“Nancy?” Nancy and a friend in said friends car, though he can’t make out who it is with Nancy in the way.

“What’re you doing out here in the rain?”

“My car’s in the shop. Waiting for the bus.”

“Not anymore. Hop in!”

Like he’s gonna turn down a ride.

He hadn’t noticed Jonathan in the driver’s seat.

“Byers?”

Jonathan motions for him to get in. “You’re gonna catch a cold if you keep standing there.”

So Steve shuts up and gets in the backseat. There’s a kid there also, who Steve’s guessing is Jonathan’s little brother.

“Hey,” he greets awkwardly.

“Hi.” The kid turns back to toying with his action figure.

How the hell did he end up in Jonathan’s car?

“If I’d known this was your car, I—uh...I wouldn’t have—“

“Don’t worry about it,” Jonathan interrupts. “I told Nancy to call you

over.”

Steve thought he was intruding.

He said as much.

“Intruding on what?” Jonathan asks, as Nancy starts giggling.

It takes Jonathan a moment to figure out what Steve’s implying.

“What?” He glances at Nancy and his face heats up. “Oh. No, we’re not—we’re not like that.”

“Just friends,” Nancy adds.

“Ew.” The kid makes a face.

Steve relaxes.

“Your dad won’t mind me pulling into the driveway?”

He shakes his head. “No, but he might be shocked I didn’t need to hold you at gunpoint to get a ride.”

“No faith in you?” Nancy questions.

“None.”

There’s an awkward silence as Jonathan pulls his car up as close to the front door as he can get.

Before Steve gets out of the car, Jonathan says, “I can pick you up tomorrow if the rain hasn’t stopped. If you want, I mean.”

Steve thinks for a moment, then nods. “Thanks.”

“Nice ride,” Steve’s father sneers sarcastically as soon as he walks into the house.

He's going straight to his room.

"How much did you pay to get in?"

He's not stopping.

"Ten dollars?"

He's not going to rise to the bait.

"Twenty dollars?"

If he takes the bait, his father will win.

"A blow job?"

If he slammed the door any harder it would have flown from the hinges.

He hasn't even gotten to his bed when the door flies open, startling him.

And there his father stands right past the threshold, angry as all hell.

It figures. It's been that kind of day.

Steve rolls his eyes and ignores him, dropping his bag before kicking off his soaked shoes. Strips off his dripping shirt without so much as glancing over at him. He knows without looking that he's still there.

It's only after he's gotten his pants that he pauses and says, "Do you mind, *father*?" with all the contempt he can muster.

"Don't you ever slam the door on me, you ungrateful little shit."

"Steven?!" She'd shouted his name in a way he'd never heard before. Kind of a mixture between shock and disappointment.

Of course, naturally, Steve pulled out of his grip and turned. Her look

mirrored his. He was positive. Both of them were staring, mouths agape, with one simple difference: he was soaked to the bone and she was clinging to an umbrella.

“M-mom, i-it’s not what it looks like!”

“Steven, get in the house before your father sees you!”

If Steve had known back then that his father had already seen them, he would have considered following his mother’s instructions.

A car horn.

Steve blinks in confusion and looks out the window, spotting Jonathan’s car sitting in the driveway. It’s still raining, but he hadn’t actually expected Jonathan to pick him up. Steve...well, he was grateful for one thing. Walking to school in the rain, he decided yesterday, is not fun. Ever.

“I’ll see you when I get home, mom!” He calls as he jogs down the stairs, pulling the front door open. He’s quick to slip into the passenger seat, tossing a grin at his chauffeur. Jonathan smiles shyly back.

“So...” Jonathan’s voice carries over the soft white of the car’s heater.
“You’re from New York...”

That’s not new information.

He’s used it to get Steve to pay attention during tutoring.

“Yeah,” Steve nods.

“I’ve always wanted to go there after high school is over. You know, NYU.”

“Shit, really? Nice.”

“Yeah...So what brings you all the way to Hawkins?”

Steve shrugs. “My parents brought me out here.”

“Kicking and screaming?” He asks.

Steve snorts. “And biting and spitting.”

He winces at the way his wrist bends when he breaks the fall. He wiggles his fingers to make sure it's not broken before turning his head to look up. There had definitely been hands on his back. Some shithead has pushed him.

And he swears there's a fucking giant standing over him, glaring hotly.

“Hey new kid,” he growls. “You'd better watch yourself.”

Steve flips him off.

The giant moves to snap his finger in half.

“Hey!” He hears Nancy cry out from somewhere in the gathering crowd. “Leave him alone!”

If he allowed himself to, he could definitely fall in love with Nancy Wheeler.

Nancy sits with him in the nurse's office as the woman wraps his wrist with an ace bandage, telling him it's only sprained and to take it easy. The small girl doesn't say a word, lacing her arm with his, until they're walking down an empty hallway.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“What was that about?”

“I wish I knew, Nance.”

Because no matter how hard he wracks his mind he can't seem to think of a single thing he's done to piss off the man who pushed him.

Other than be born, apparently.

Nancy's arm suddenly slips from his and just as he turns to look he gets punched in the face.

No way it was Nancy's fist.

He groans and turns to spit blood onto the floor.

It wasn't the same asshole from earlier, but it looked similar to him.

“What the fuck, man?!” Steve demands, pushing himself up a bit hesitantly.

“That's what happens to rats.”

“Rats”? What are you talking about? Did all those steroids go to your *head*?”

He admits that he deserved to get hit this time.

“You got him suspended!”

“Who?!”

“No.” Nancy jumps in. “He didn't get anyone suspended. I did.”

“I really hope you didn't create shit for yourself by protecting me,” Steve mutters, leaving the nurse's office for the second time that day. Only this time, Jonathan was on one side of him while Nancy was on the other.

“I didn't create anything. You heard what that idiot said—they don't hit girls. I'm safe.”

“And cute. Cute helps.” Steve winks and Nancy giggles.

Jonathan eyes them for a moment, then says, "Let's just take you home. You look ready to fall over. We can study tomorrow."

"What happened to your face?"

Steve looks up, mildly startled. His father...actually looks worried about him. He tries to grin nonchalantly at him but it lacks any meaning as he winces through it. His father stands in the doorway, arms crossed, eyebrows quirked. There's a slight flicker of hope inside of Steve.

"Tried to kiss some poor guy who didn't want it?"

And the flicker has officially burned out.

"Go fuck yourself, dad."

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter is a little bit all over the place.
Apologies in advance.

Steve flinches when a car horn sounds from outside the house, and curiously goes to look, raising an eyebrow at the sight of Jonathan's car.

It's not raining this morning.

The first time in days.

He finishes getting ready in a hurry and rushes down anyway.

"Bye mom!"

And he doesn't waste a second hopping into the seat, but doesn't fail to miss his father glaring at him through the living room window, coffee cup in hand.

"Thanks, man," he says, quietly but more sincerely than he's been in a distressingly long time.

Jonathan looks confused. "For what? The ride? No problem."

"For everything." There's a pause before he starts speaking again. "Since I've met you, you've been...well...great, I guess. You didn't even know my name before you offered me help—a friend, and you've put up with my shit since then, which is...I don't know...amazing?"

"I mean, did you expect anything less?"

"Than amazing?"

"Than a show of kindness."

“You and Nancy put up with me when no one else would.”

“Well, to be honest, Steve...you’re kind of an idiot.”

It takes Steve just a moment before he realizes Jonathan is just joking.

“Oh, screw you, Byers.”

Jonathan cracks a smile.

“And easily provoked.”

“Steve, where did that bruise come from?” Nancy asks. Jonathan crosses his arms on top of his textbook and looks just as curious.

“I technically got jumped yesterday. Or did you forget?” Steve shoots back with a roll of his eyes.

Nancy looks thoughtful.

“But...that wasn’t there yesterday.”

“Must have formed over night.”

Nancy accepts this begrudgingly, but he can tell she doesn’t believe him.

A car horn honks.

As grateful as Steve is for the rides, he can’t wait until he gets his car back next week. He won’t have to hurry to get ready then—though Jonathan had already said he’d wait as long as it took.

“Bye mom!”

Right as he pulls the door open, from the kitchen he hears a muttered, “Whore.”

He freezes.

Jonathan waves at him through the windshield.

His dad could go fuck himself.

“You’re actually good at this.”

Steve smiles at the praise.

“Astronomy isn’t as hard as I thought it’d be, I guess.”

“But you can barely do basic algebra.”

Steve shrugs. “I’ve always kinda liked looking at the stars. I don’t know.”

“Really?” Jonathan asks, surprised.

“Yeah.”

“Me too. I used to take Will out to look at them whenever our parents...” His voice trails off as he catches himself and he clears his throat.

Steve doesn’t ask, though he’s curious. Not his business.

Across the lunchroom table Jonathan is saying something to Nancy and him—he thinks it’s about photography, but he’s not sure. He finds himself, instead, horribly distracted by the movement of Jonathan’s lips.

Why the hell am I staring at his lips? Stop looking at his lips, Harrington!

It takes way too long before he realizes that Nancy’s been calling his name. When he snaps out of it, Jonathan looks slightly annoyed.

“What?” Steve blinks.

Jonathan shakes his head. “I’ve been talking to you for the past five minutes.”

Oh.

“Shit, man, I’m sorry.”

Silence.

“Aw, Jonathan, come on.”

Silence.

“Will you just talk to me? I wasn’t ignoring you, dude. I just got distracted!”

“By what?”

A loaded question.

Pause.

“By *who*?” He amends after a moment, glancing at Nancy for the quickest second.

It’s not like Steve’s about to admit to being distracted by Jonathan’s mouth.

What’s more queer than that?

“I...uh—“

“Hey, fags! Heads up!”

Milk carton to the head.

Topic end.

“Apologize!”

“Nance, this really isn’t neces—“

“Shh, Steve,” Nancy interrupts. “This moron has something he wants to say. Right?”

“...Sorry.”

Steve wants to die. Having a girl stand up for him in front of the school? Yeah, that’s not absolutely humiliating at all.

“Yeah, whatever, apology accepted. Nancy, let’s go.”

He doesn’t wait for her before he’s walking away, ignoring Jonathan’s concerned looks. Did nobody think he can handle things for himself?

“You really don’t get this?”

Steve just shrugs.

“Steve—“

“I’ve never been good at math, okay?”

“This is eighth grade math, Steve.”

“So?”

“Didn’t you ever get tutoring back in New York?”

“Nope.”

“Couldn’t you have hired—?”

“You think my father would have paid for that?” Steve says, rather harshly.

Jonathan sighs. Rubs his temples. Moves his seat closer to Steve’s.

“Okay, listen up...”

“Will you at least tell me what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“Bullshit,” Jonathan scoffs, brown eyes burning into Steve as he glares.

Steve shakes his head and stands up, only to have Jonathan gently place a hand on his arm to stop him from leaving.

“Nothing’s wrong!” Steve insists.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

He stares at Steve a moment longer.

“Okay. Just...I’m here to talk if you need me.”

Steve sighs and plops back down. He doesn’t smile or thank him.

“What’re you doing now?”

Steve looks oddly at Jonathan, closing his last book to slide into his bag. They’ve studied long and frustratingly hard this time. An important test was coming up and Steve doesn’t want to fail. Not just because he doesn’t want to fail another test and flunk out, but he also doesn’t want Jonathan to feel like his time was wasted.

He doesn’t know why he cares about that.

“I don’t know. Could I catch a ride?”

“Course. I...was wondering if you needed to go straight home.”

“Nope.”

“Cool.”

“What is this place?” Steve asks, looking around the desolate area.

There's nothing here but old pavement broken in a few places where trees were trying to take root.

"A parking lot."

"You took me to a parking lot." Steve isn't quite sure how to respond beyond that.

"Look up."

And he does.

Straight at the stars.

"Why did you take me here?" He asks after a few moments, looking over at his tutor—his friend.

For a while Jonathan doesn't answer, and right when Steve thinks he hadn't heard him, he says, "You said you liked the stars."

That shocks Steve.

"So?"

"You've had a rough couple of weeks. I figured this would at least bring you a little happiness."

More than Jonathan will even ever know.

More than he'll ever know.

The parking lot is kind of nice even though it's isolated. It makes it feel very private, but has the added bonus of having a great view of the stars. Sitting against the hood of Jonathan's car, he notices the other boy looking up at them almost reverently. It was...

"I like you."

Jonathan flinches, and while Steve stares in horror of what just came out of his own mouth, he turns sharply to look at him.

“What—what did you say?”

Steve makes a break for it.

Directly into a pothole.

6. Chapter 6

“Shit!”

Steve swears his feet are going to be over his head in two seconds, and he squeezes his eyes shut so he doesn't have to see it happen. But as his back hits something and he doesn't seem to move any further, he realizes that he's safe. He takes a deep breath. It's a relief.

“...Nice one,” Jonathan says.

Steve blushes.

Actually fucking blushes.

Why did Byers have to be his tutor?

Why *him*?

“Hey,” Jonathan says gently. “No need to be embarrassed. We all fall sometimes. You just..don't go about it gracefully.”

His breath is cool against Steve's heated skin as he helps him get back on his feet. He doesn't release him completely though, probably afraid the older boy was going to try to run off again. Steve thinks he's on fire, his blood boiling, brain steaming in his skull. He was definitely going to die from embarrassment, but Jonathan is still entirely calm.

“Why were you going to run off?” Jonathan asks quietly. “So you like me. Big deal.”

Steve shakes his head.

He was not going to have this conversation.

He's just going to keep his mouth shut and—

“Weirder stuff has been known to happen.” It's Jonathan's attempt at

a joke, but it doesn't help any.

"You don't get it," Steve mutters.

He feels his throat swelling.

Face still burning.

Jonathan tilts his head to look at him, providing his complete and undivided attention, and Steve feels sick knowing that he's about to lose the other boy's friendship.

"I like you."

Jonathan's eyebrows draw together in the most curious fashion, almost as if he's contemplating Steve's words before he says, "I like you too."

"No—Damn it!" Frustration there. "I like you. *Like* you."

He braces for impact.

A hand on his arm.

Warm.

"I know."

"You aren't listening to me!" Steve nearly shouts. Jonathan's brushing him off. "I like you. And I'm scared to get close to you, because everyone who's ever told me that they'd never leave *left!* And I don't want you to go. I know," he coughs, choking on his words but barreling on, "I know it's fucking stupid. But we all know that I'm an idiot, so..."

Nothing.

Silence.

Jonathan isn't even looking at him.

Sure, maybe back in New York Steve would never have even considered being friends with someone like Jonathan, but it wasn't

until he and Nancy came along that Steve finally understood what it's like to have *real* friends.

And Steve just fucked it up with his little breakdown.

"I'm sorry," he mutters. "I'll go."

"Whoever said I was gonna leave?" The other boy's voice is so calm that it freezes Steve in his tracks. There's no way he heard him right.

"What?"

"Whoever said I was gonna leave?" He repeats evenly.

"You...Jesus, man! You can't like me. Not like this."

"Why not?"

"Because I...I'm a guy!"

"That isn't stopping *you* from liking *me*, is it?"

"I...I don't get it." It burns a little bit to admit, but Steve is so desperate to know that he hasn't ruined things that he lets it go. "What're you...what're you saying?"

There's silence. Neither of them so much as breathe. They both open their mouths to speak at the same time.

"I—"

"I—"

Eye contact.

"Sorry," Steve mutters, giving him the floor.

Jonathan breathes. "I'm saying that it's okay that you like me—weirder things have happened."

Okay, not what I thought you were gonna say, but I'll take it.

"So...I didn't ruin everything?"

Jonathan just chuckles.

Hope, like a bunch of butterflies, suddenly takes flight in the pit of Steve's stomach.

Hope, because if Jonathan doesn't think that it's so weird for Steve to like him like that, then there's a possibility that he could like him back. If he's not totally disgusted by the fact that the older boy is into him, then maybe Steve still stands a chance. If he doesn't want to beat him until there's more blood on the ground than in him...

He stops thinking.

The butterflies are beginning to burn.

It hurts too much to hope.

He's not about to lose his friendship over something so...he can't call it stupid, but that's not the point. It's just important that Jonathan's willing to be near him since he knows now.

And Steve can't figure out what compelled him to tell him.

It doesn't matter.

Nothing matters.

Jonathan's not hitting him, and what's more—he's not shunning him.

A relief.

A comfort.

He doesn't need to return his feelings.

So long as he doesn't hate him.

Steve can deal with just being his friend.

Leaning against the hood of Jonathan's car, Steve watches the stars twinkle. He got lucky this time, he knows. Jonathan doesn't hate him

for his perversion, but he was going to have to be careful from now on. He has to make sure this never feels weird to Jonathan. He's not sure he can deal with being alone. Not again. It hurts far too much.

"Are you okay?"

Steve looks up at him, tilting his head.

"You look upset," Jonathan elaborates.

"I..."

Jonathan's eyes beg for honesty.

"I just don't want to ruin this."

"Ruin what?"

Steve doesn't ever want to go through it again. He can't stomach further loss. "I...value you...as a friend."

"Well, cool. I value you as a friend too."

Silence.

"How could you ruin that?"

Silence.

"Well?"

Steve shrugs. Is he actually expecting him to answer?

Jonathan sighs.

"Okay, man, listen up. I'm only going to tell you this once. You're not going to ruin *anything*."

"Steven, get in the car."

"No."

“Steven! Get in the car!”

“No.”

“Steve, just do as your father says,” his mother urged from the passenger seat, but he just shakes his head, almost spitefully as he wraps an arm from his waist.

“Steven! Get your ass in this car right now or so help me God—“

“Just shut up!”

“Excuse me?!”

“Steve, maybe you should just go,” breathed into his air gently.

Steve didn’t want to.

He got hit as he slid into the backseat.

The engine revved.

They shot backwards.

Bang.

*“I’ll be here. Whenever you need me,” Jonathan promises gently.
“Forever.”*

“I’ve been promised forever before.”

“I’m different.”

“I’ve been promised that too.”

“We’re friends, Steve. You should give me a chance.”

*“I’ve been told that a *shitload* amount of times.”*

“Please—“

“-It’s not worth it to suffer that kind of pain again,” Steve practically whispers. Jonathan doesn’t try to restrain him when he moves away, which he’s grateful for. “If we’d met earlier, I might actually believe you.”

“But you didn’t,” Jonathan says quietly. “So you don’t.”

“Thanks for understanding.”

Jonathan doesn’t understand.

That much is obvious.

But he doesn’t say anything further, he just let's Steve sit on the hood of his car stewing. Steve’s hands are gripping at each other, palms going clammy. He’s afraid he’s going to rub a hole into his palm, until suddenly Jonathan grips it.

He takes Steve’s hand.

Steve looks up at him suddenly, shocked.

“What are you doing?”

Jonathan doesn’t answer.

His hand is warm.

His presence is comforting.

His demeanor is reassuring.

It’s odd, holding his hand, but Steve’s not about to complain.

He’s going to escape instead.

“I...have to go.”

It’s said with much reluctance and panic on his part, as he slides off the other boy’s car and let’s his hand go.

Letting go was the worst feeling.

7. Chapter 7

Bang?

“What the hell was that?!” Steve looked, but...he wasn’t there anymore. His stomach drops to the carpet beneath his feet. He looked in every possible direction before getting out of the car. His father shouted something rude at him, but he didn’t listen.

He couldn’t have walked away so quickly.

“Steven!” His father roared, but he didn’t care that he was mad. “Steven, get your ass back in the—“

“—What the fuck did you do?!”

“Steve, will you just get in the car?”

Steve looks at Jonathan oddly, trying hard to swallow the memory of the pain that phrase brought him, and failed. Something in his expression must have given him away, because Jonathan walks forward, pausing when the older boy’s within arms reach and then—cautiously—entering his personal space. As though he’s not sure if Steve will lash out or not, he carefully touches his arms.

Steve tries to tell himself that Jonathan’s word held none of the malice he associated them with.

He tries to tell himself that this voice is different, lighter.

But he can’t.

“I—I can’t be your friend anymore,” he says suddenly, and feels worse for doing so. The least he could have done was say it definitively. Instead he sounded like some wishy-washy beaten girl. Jonathan’s expression says as much. He doesn’t believe him. But he also looks shocked.

“Can’t?” He asks, crossing his arms. “Or won’t?”

Steve can't answer. He opens his mouth to, but his voice catches in his throat like he's going through puberty all over again. His eyes...damn it! His eyes fill with tears.

Jonathan hugs him.

"Steve, you have to talk to me."

And Steve wants to. God knows he wants to confess everything, but his throat closes up around the tears he's fighting back. Talking isn't going to happen.

"Steve, please tell me what's going on?"

Steve tries to pull away but Jonathan just hugs him tighter.

"Can you just not fight with me right now? Steve, what the hell?"

"Christ, Jonathan. I can't!"

"You can't what?"

"I can't do this again!"

"Okay. It's okay. Everything's okay." Steve can hear a touch of panic in Jonathan's voice as he speaks to him. "Everything's going to be okay. Steve, just—just get in the car."

Steve expects to hear metal impact flesh.

Flesh impact pavement.

Bones break.

He squeezes his eyes shut, hands gripping tightly to Jonathan without realizing it, obviously startling him.

"Okay. Okay. Don't...dammit, Steve, what's wrong?"

"I killed him."

He feels Jonathan go tense against him. Probably nervous.

“Who?”

“My...I guess you could call him my...my boyfriend.”

Even if death he can barely say the words. *My boyfriend.*

At least there's no more shame that used to come with it.

Jonathan stops requesting that he gets in the car with him and instead just carefully ushers Steve into it himself. He stands outside for a few moments after closing the door on Steve's side, running fingers through his hair. He's probably as shocked by the confession as the one who just made it. Steve's never admitted it before.

By the time he gets into the driver's seat he's much more composed than the older boy is.

They drive for an hour before Jonathan has the guts to park and say, “Explain.”

Steve doesn't want to.

“Steve, please.”

But he has to.

His eyes were open. Blue, and warm, and beautiful as Steve lifted him as much as his flimsy arms could. His eyes were open, and warm, and...and...Steve chokes.

A flash of lightning.

A crash of thunder.

He felt someone walk up behind him.

Heard a gasp.

Mom.

His eyes were open, and warm, and...and scared.

Terrified.

Steve sobs.

His father calls for an ambulance.

He wishes for a rock to die under. Curls his arms around his head and wishes to die like this if he can't have a rock. Crying isn't masculine.

"Son of a bitch."

He isn't going to respond.

"Son of a bitch!"

They were only a few blocks from the house.

"God! What is this going to do to my insurance?!"

He was going to get out of the car and walk to his room.

"Fucking..."

He was going to lay in his bed and hope that he didn't open his eyes in the morning.

His father slammed on the brakes.

"This is your fault, you little fag!"

Steve didn't look up, not even when his father hit him.

"You're paying for the repairs! Goddamn disappointment is what you are."

He was.

Steve's treading water, finds himself wishing that it's possible to literally drown in guilt and regret. What he wouldn't have given to, in a few short minutes, feel the telltale burning of his lungs as they began to shrivel and die. The pain would be agonizing, he's sure, but at least it would be the last of it.

He's sure his sobbing is outrageously loud.

He doubts Jonathan can understand a word he's saying.

No doubt the younger boy would be kicking him out of his car soon.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?"

Steve didn't answer. He walked straight past his father's looming form and opened the front door. But his father was stronger than he was and closed the door again with one hand.

"You're still grounded."

He wasn't going to respond. He'd climb out the window if he had to.

"Or did you forget what it means to be grounded."

Steve hesitated.

"I can reteach you."

He reached for the door again.

The crack of the belt was louder than a gunshot.

Maybe, he thinks distantly, it is possible to drown in guilt. Maybe the built up remorse would finally destroy him. Maybe he would finally be crushed under the weight of it all. The pain in his chest is outrageous, but with any luck it will only last a few more minutes.

Maybe the stress of having to tell this to someone would really kill him.

Maybe.

But he doubts it.

Never in his entire life had he been so lucky.

And the worst part wasn't the pain.

The worst part isn't the knowledge that he was gone.

The worst part wasn't that, by the time he limped to the funeral home, he was too late.

The worst part wasn't that, when he got there, she looked at him with all too familiar blue eyes. Warm just like his. Loving just like his.

The worst part wasn't even that when she looked at him she said, "He asked for you."

The worst part was when she said, "You weren't there."

"Steve..."

But it hurts too much to respond.

"Steve..."

He can't even look up.

"Steve."

It's too much to know that after all of this, Jonathan is going to kick him out.

"Steve!"

Far too much to know that, for a brief second, he thought he could trust him.

“Damn it, Steve!”

Here it comes, the slap and the stranding.

“Steve, stop it!”

Jonathan grabs him as gently but firmly as possible, but Steve still flinches.

“Steve,” he soothes, “you gotta stop crying. My mom and brother are gonna be real freaked out if I bring you in sobbing like this.”

Steve can’t help but notice.

Jonathan’s been crying too.

8. Chapter 8

“Hey, Jonathan, where have you—oh. Hi.”

Steve will admit, Will Byers may only be thirteen, but the kid knew how to give a good deadly look. Jonathan just ruffles the boy’s hair with a smile on his face, ignoring the look his brother’s giving Steve.

“I’ve been with Steve,” Jonathan says. “You remember him, right?”

“What’s he doing here?”

Great.

“Don’t mind him,” Jonathan tells Steve before giving his brother a sharp look. “Don’t be rude, Will.”

Five seconds and the kid already hates him.

“Mom’s working late again, so you have to cook dinner.”

“Later, Will,” Jonathan mutters over his shoulder, sort of pushing Steve down the hall.

“But Jonathan, I’m hungry!”

“We have snacks in the cupboards. Just give me twenty minutes, okay?”

Will groans and shoots another dirty look at Steve, who quickly looks away and keeps his mouth shut. Jonathan leads him into what Steve’s assuming is his bedroom and closes the door behind them.

“Sorry about him. He’s usually not like that. I don’t know what’s up with him.”

“Yeah, it’s cool. Probably...just one of those days for him too.”

Jonathan shrugs. "Probably."

Dilemma number one; he needs to contact his parents somehow.

As though he read his mind, Jonathan says, "The phone is on the wall by the living room if you need to let your parents know where you are."

A part of him wants to ask Jonathan to come with him in case the kid tries to murder him when he's not looking, but he's a big boy, and so what if the kid gives him dirty looks the entire time? He can handle it. He nods and heads down the hall and luckily for him Will is too occupied with the TV to either notice or care. He picks up the phone and dials his house.

"Hey, mom," Steve mumbles a little awkwardly. "I'm staying at a friend's house tonight." Conscious of the fact that Will is close enough to hear every word that comes out of his mouth he continues, "Just a friend from school. Yeah, my tutor."

By tutor, she thinks he means Nancy. He lets her believe it. When he hangs up, he sees Will looking at him oddly and gives him a small nod of acknowledgement before he heads back to Jonathan's room.

Dilemma two; how is he supposed to change with a pissed off kid *outside* of the room, and his outrageously attractive friend *inside* the room?

"I, uh—"

"Will you be okay by yourself for a minute, Steve?"

Does he think I'm five years old?

"Yeah. No problem."

"Gotta put dinner on and talk to my brother, find out what's wrong with him. Are you hungry?"

Steve shakes his head and changes into the clothes Jonathan gave him when he's alone.

Through the door he hears shouting.

Jonathan is arguing with Will, probably about him.

No way in hell is he stepping foot outside this room right now.

Through the door he hears Jonathan say, "Don't call him that again. Okay?"

The shouting dies down a moment later.

Dilemma number three; where is he going to sleep?

He can't take the bed—it's Jonathan's bed. He's lucky that his friend didn't make him go home after all the crying he did. He's lucky Jonathan was nice enough to stay with him. Lucky he wanted to make sure Steve is really okay. He can't just impose more than he already is.

But there's not anywhere else to sleep.

He's laying on the floor when Jonathan comes back in a while later.

"Sorry that took so long—what're you doing?" He asks.

"Going to sleep," Steve says.

Jonathan disappears for a moment and then comes back in the room with an air mattress that he throws at Steve.

He goes to school, at Jonathan's request, sleep deprived, to take a test.

So he skips tutoring.

Takes the bus back to his house.

It's pouring by the time the bus drops him off two blocks from home, and he walks the rest of the way. So, not only is Jonathan going to be angry with him for ditching him when he sees him next, but Steve's probably going to catch a cold. Awesome.

By the time he gets to the front door he doesn't feel well.

His mom notices.

"Go to bed, honey. I'll bring dinner up later."

"Mmm..." Steve mutters, sort of rolling over at the clinking of China.
"...Mom?"

He feels a hand on his forehead, leans into it because the hand feels cool.

"M not 'ungry," he grumbles.

"I know, darling. That's why you didn't eat dinner."

It's only then that he realizes there light shining through his window.

It's morning.

There's a honking from outside.

There'd been a honking for a while.

A few minutes later the doorbell rings.

If his mother is up here with him, then that leaves only his father to have to answer the door...

Shit.

"Who the hell are you?"

He flinches when he heard his father's voice, moving even quicker through the living room to stop the conversation in its tracks. This is the last thing he needed. To be outed to his father like—

"Seth," the smooth as silk voice carried through the house.

"Why?"

"We're gonna go play some football."

Steve never loved someone as much as he loved that guy right then.

His dad even slapped him on the back as he slipped by saying, "About damn time you became a man."

"Nancy?"

He flinches at his father's voice, peeking from under the covers at him.

"Wha?"

"Nancy?" His father repeats, crossing his arms. *"What? You're not a fairy anymore?"*

Steve mutters something rude into his pillow, but his father obviously misunderstands his intent because he chuckles almost warmly at him.

"About goddamn time you grew out of that phase."

"Esunafav."

"Scuse me?"

Steve lifts his head so his father hears him when he repeats, *"It's not a phase."* A moment later, *"I like girls. And I also like boys."* Just to clear things up once and for all, *"Deal with it."*

He doesn't flinch when his door slams closed.

Riing.

Riiing.

Riii—"What?"

"Is that how you always answer your phone?"

"Yeah."

"Your dad, uh...he said you contracted some gay strain of AIDS or something?"

"Funny guy, ain't he?"

"Not really. It took me the whole ride to school to calm Nancy down."

"He's an asshole, I thought I made this clear the other day."

"Yeah, well..." A pause. "Just checking on you."

"Really now?"

"You alright?"

"...No."

"Steve?"

"I think he's plotting my murder."

"What?"

"When I went to go throw up I saw him cleaning his shotgun."

Pause.

Silence.

“I’m coming over. Pack a bag.”

Notes for the Chapter:

For those wondering what the hell Will’s problem is, it’ll be explained more soon, but basically he’s heard some things about Steve around school and he’s afraid Steve will, to put it bluntly, turn his brother “queer.” Keep in mind that this is still set in a time where being gay is considered taboo and even immoral to a lot of people, so when you add that plus having Lonnie for a father, of course the kid will be a little confused. But don’t worry, I’ll touch more on that later.

9. Chapter 9

“Steven?”

He doesn’t look.

“Steven, sweetheart?”

He can’t look back.

“Baby?”

And it’s not that he doesn’t want to.

“Sweetheart?”

It’s just that, if he turns, he’s probably going to fall down.

“Honey, where are you—?”

The doorbell rings.

His mother looks at him curiously but goes to answer it, expression going from curious to shocked when Jonathan carefully slips by her with a very polite, “Excuse me, Ma’am,” and grabs Steve’s arm. Steve is shaking with the effort not to throw up. Jonathan looks worried when he realizes this. “You okay, man?”

“Just get me out of here.”

When they get to the doorway, Jonathan, with the most level tone voice Steve’s ever heard says, “Excuse me, Ma’am. He’s not going to be able to walk out on his own, you’re going to have to move.”

“No!” Steve’s never heard his mother speak so ferociously as when she says, “Who do you think you are? You’re not taking my son!”

“Mom,” Steve mutters. He doesn’t want them to fight. “Ma, move. Please. I’ll be fine.”

“Steven, honey, who is this?”

“Jonathan. Classmate. Please just let me—“

“Where’s the bum boy going?”

Of course *he* had to show his face.

“Sir?”

He turns his head slightly to peer at Jonathan as his friend half turns to look at the man. Something about his friend’s expression worries him, but he doesn’t say anything.

“What?” His father demands coldly.

“Go...go fuck yourself.”

And Steve is carefully being maneuvered out of the house and to Jonathan’s car.

And, more importantly, Jonathan just told his father off. He sounded nervous as hell while doing so, but he did it.

If his friend’s sexuality isn’t still questionable, Steve would have kissed him.

“Jonathan, why’d you rush—“

Steve looks nervously at Will, worried at the way the kid stops talking. The look he gave Steve kind of made him want to crawl into a hole. Why did everyone have to hate him? Why can’t he be likeable?

“You don’t look so good,” Will says, expression softening only slightly as he takes a step forward. “Jonathan, what happened to him?”

“Put him in my room while I get mom. I’ll explain everything in a minute.”

Hands.

He struggles, jerking his shoulders out of the grip and falling back onto the mattress.

He hates the hands.

Hands hurt.

Hands hit, and punched, and pinched.

Hands bruised.

Hands swung.

Hands...rub gentle circles against his shoulder.

Hands run soothingly through his hair.

Hands lift him by the shoulder just enough for an arm to slide under his back for support. Hands put something to his mouth—cool water that he sips until he figures out that his eyes can open.

“You feeling okay now, sweetie?”

He can't believe he's saddened that it's not Jonathan.

“Mrs. Byers?” He questions with bleary eyes and a cotton mouth. The woman smiles at him softly and gently lowers him back down to the mattress.

“Just me, honey. I sent Jonathan to the store to get cold meds and stuff, see if he could find anything that'll help.”

“I...I...”

“Just relax, Steve, okay? We'll figure this all out.”

Easier said than done.

“I'm really sorry,” he hears the kid mutter from where he sits on the

edge of the bed. "All the kids at school were saying you're a...a *fag*, and then I thought, you know, 'cause Jonathan hangs with you so much..."

"You thought I would turn him into a fag, too."

"...Well, yeah. My dad used to tell us being a queer got you beat up or killed. I just didn't want to see that happen to Jonathan. I'm sorry, Steve."

"It's okay, buddy. Forget about it."

Silence.

"So, your dad hates you because you like boy's?"

Steve doesn't actually answer, just looks up at the kid who's now changing his shirt for him, because he's soaked in his own vomit and Joyce is making soup. And considering he can't sit up long enough to undress himself...

"That sucks."

"And I like girls too, you know."

"How does that even work?"

"Just does."

"And he beat you—"

"Can we not talk about this?"

"Mom said we can call social services."

"They can't do anything for me."

He's not a minor.

"Can I take a shower?"

Will gives him a small smile and nods. "Sure you can. Do you...are you gonna need help?"

"Nah. I can make it."

But Will helps him to the bathroom anyway and leaves the door open just a crack.

"Just in case," the kid explains.

The water feels good, even though he can barely stand up under the stream. It makes some of the bruises feel better. It clears his nose so he can breathe again. It cleans off a few days worth of sweat and grime. He feels like a new person by the time he's toweling off and...realizes he doesn't have any clothes.

Damn.

Why doesn't he ever think ahead?

"Hey, Will?" He calls into the hallway. No answer. "Will, you there, kid?"

"Steve?"

It's Jonathan.

Even better.

"I...uh...need clothes."

Pause.

"I'll be right there," Jonathan says.

He can't exactly figure out why Jonathan didn't bring him his clothes from the bag he packed, but his friend's clothes are more comfortable. Maybe it's because Steve's clothes are more preppy and

sophisticated, while Jonathan's are more casual and cozy. Maybe it's because that it's well worn, and therefore softer than his own. Maybe it's the smell.

Yeah.

Probably.

His mother always told him, ever since he was a kid, that he gets attached to smells real quick.

Smells are the best memory triggers.

Something about it is comforting.

Steve sits on the edge of the bed, back to Jonathan as the younger boy changes into his own clothing, talking to him as he does so. "I hope you're not allergic to anything. Mom told me to get some of those PM medicines. She figured we could try them until you get better. Figured you wouldn't want a doctor."

She figured right.

He doesn't need a hospital bill held over his head by his father.

The mattress beside him dips as Jonathan sits down.

"You okay?"

Steve doesn't answer.

He doesn't have to.

Jonathan knows.

10. Chapter 10

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for spamming you guys with multiple chapters today, I'm just on a roll (for once) but this is the last chapter I'm posting tonight.

Thank you so much for the support, comments and kudos. It means a lot.

"He'd have me stoned if he could." Steve's not entirely sure where the comment comes from, but he felt he needed to say something to break the oppressive silence and that's what came out.

Apparently Jonathan doesn't know where the comment came from either, because he responds with a less than eloquent, "Huh?"

"My father. He..." he starts pulling his fingers awkwardly, not entirely sure why he's sharing this. "If stoning was legal, he'd do it."

A hand falls onto his shoulder, and though he flinches slightly he doesn't pull away.

"Steve—"

"I'm serious."

"Mmm." He rolls off of the bed, stumbling a little as he walks out of the bedroom without a shirt. "Pancakes." Jonathan and Joyce's plan to feed him different medications until he wasn't dying anymore has worked out oddly well. They've made sure to keep the doses well spaced so he wouldn't accidentally OD, and by the time Sunday rolls around he feels better. "You made pancakes?"

Jonathan looks up at him, smiles, hands him a plate.

"I love you man."

Will's eyes widen.

Wha...?

Did he really just say that?

He's about to apologize rather profusely until Jonathan smiles and laughs. "Just eat."

"Steve!"

He flinches and spins around just as Nancy wraps her arms around him and kisses him on the cheek.

"Jonathan told me you moved in with him! I'm so happy!"

"Wha—why?"

"Now I can see you both whenever I want, dummy."

He can't help but smile. Wonders again what it would be like if he had fallen for Nancy instead.

Maybe one of these days he'll allow himself to find out, if she'll have him.

"Are you feeling any better? I heard you got really sick. Your mom called the school and everything. All the teachers were talking about it. I was worried. Why would you walk home in the rain—"

"I miss you too, Nance."

"Welcome back, Steven."

Steve looks up at the teacher as he moves to leave the room for second period, nods his head at him. His teacher actually doesn't sound so...mad at him today. Which is a bit of a relief. Because he's not feeling sick anymore, but he's still exhausted.

“Here.”

“Huh?”

He looks at the paper the teacher hands him, raising an eyebrow at the man as he flips the sheet over.

A big red **D** headed the page.

“Holy shit—I passed?”

The teacher nods

.

“OH, THANK YOU JESUS!”

“Jonathan!” He shouts as he rounds the corner. “Nancy, I—“

Why is there a crowd around Jonathan’s locker?

And why are they chanting?

There’s some sort of frantic shouting from the other side of the circle that he can’t quite make out.

“Leave him alone!”

That was clear as a bell.

It’s Nancy’s voice.

If Nancy is shouting like that it means it’s Jonathan who’s in trouble.

He doesn’t even think as he pushes past everyone to help his friend.

“What the hell was going on?” Steve asks as the nurse looks at Jonathan’s naked chest. He has a cut on his shoulder from where he was slammed up against an open locker, while Steve has a bloody and bruised nose from when he tried to pull Tommy off of Jonathan.

But, you know, other than that they don't look much worse for wear.

"I don't know," Jonathan mutters, rubbing the back of his neck. "All I know is that Tommy suddenly jumped me. Like I was just gonna sit back and let him do it."

"You're all good, boys," the nurse tells them. "Schools letting out soon. Why don't you two go home?"

The drive home is quiet. Neither of them say a word as they drop Nancy off at her house, and the silence persists well into their own private travel. Jonathan doesn't say a word as they enter the house. Doesn't say a word to Joyce—just goes into the bathroom, but Steve pulls her aside to explain.

"Jonathan hasn't been in a fight in a while," Joyce says with wide eyes. "Do you have any idea what happened?"

"Didn't say a word to me the whole ride."

"I'll go talk to him, okay?"

"Okay."

"How long is this going to go on for?" Joyce demands, near tears.

Jonathan is getting stitches.

It seems like everyday for two weeks Jonathan has been getting beat up. And today the boys really got the best of him. He'd been pushed to the ground, and never managed to regain the upper hand. A boot to the face ripped a gash across him.

"Why do they keep doing this?" Will is crying, so Steve puts an arm around him.

"I don't know, bud."

Steve misses his smile.

No matter what he does to make him laugh, it doesn't work.

He asked him if he wanted to go to his favorite pizza place. When he said no, Steve took Will and brought him home some, but Jonathan didn't eat it.

He asked him if he wanted to go see a movie with Will, Nancy and Nancy's brother Mike, but Jonathan refused to even watch the movie they'd rented and brought back to the house for him.

He asked him if he was okay, and he wouldn't even look at Steve.

And as time goes on, he only gets worse.

11. Chapter 11

Notes for the Chapter:

HAPPY HALLOWEEN!

Expect 2-3 more chapters to be published after this one. Already have them written out, so why make you guys wait?

Sitting at Jonathan's desk, writing an English paper, Steve's almost content in the silence. It's not quite as awkward as it has been the past three weeks. Jonathan is still upset, but the underlying anger that had been there wasn't quite as noticeable anymore.

Not until his feet slams to the floor when when he practically jumps up from his bed. Storming from the room without a word or glance in Steve's direction.

When he follows him out, Steve notes that Jonathan doesn't so much as look at Will and Will's friends, who all paused their game of D&D when they heard the door fly open.

What the hell is going on?

"Where's he going?"

Will glances at the clock on the wall before saying, "Probably the cemetery."

The explanation stops Steve from following him.

"An anniversary?"

"Yeah."

Steve nods his head, shakes off the shock and starts to move again. But not before he asks, "A relative?"

"A classmate," Dustin pipes up, earning an elbow to the ribs from Lucas.

Once more, Steve freezes.

A classmate?

"What do you mean?"

Will looks up at him finally. "You should probably just ask him if you wanna know. Sorry."

"No. I understand."

Or, at the very least, he's going to.

"Jonathan!"

The car, slowly backing away from the house, stops as the younger man sticks his head out of the window to say, "Steve, now's not really a good time."

"I know, man. I'm sorry. I just—" Steve realizes right as he's about to speak that what he has in mind probably wasn't the best idea. "No one should go to the cemetery alone."

Jonathan pauses, a strange look on his face, and starts, "Steve—"

"I know this is private. But...I'll stay in the car."

A pause.

His friend nods.

"Okay."

They're in the car for an hour, in complete silence, before Jonathan so much as let's put a sigh. And then he's pulling up against a grey,

gothic style fence. The stereotypical kind you see in all the movies. The kind that absolutely screams cemetery.

He parks.

Gets out of the car.

Looks at Steve.

“Stay here, okay?”

Steve doesn’t want to.

He wants to go with him.

He wants to be some sort of comfort to him.

He wants to help.

He nods his head.

“I’ll be right here.”

So Steve stays

And stays.

And stays.

And stays until he can’t stay any longer.

It’s not an impulsive action, stepping out of the car into the freezing winter air. He sits there for a good five minutes trying to talk himself into leaving. He can’t figure out why Jonathan has been in the cemetery for fifteen minutes. He’s been really sad recently...

Steve is worried, and though he doesn’t want to risk his friend being mad at him if it turns out everything is alright, he doesn’t want to risk something being wrong even more.

So he walks in.

He's never seen such a sad cemetery in his life. He's never gone very often. Just once or twice after his grandfather died—but it was beautiful. There were always flowers, even in the winter. The tombstones were always neatly polished. It was sad and happy at the same time. This one...

He counts no less than four partially broken tombstones, and one that's completely knocked over just steps past the gate that's barely on its hinges. There are no flowers, just dead leaves. Dead leaves and sadness.

It feels as though the cemetery is abandoned, and he can't figure out why a church would allow it to get so bad. They take care of their property. Cemeteries belong to churches, right? It doesn't make any sense.

Some of the dates on the stones are old. Some much newer. Some don't have dates at all. Some don't have names, which makes him think that there were probably unmarked graves as well. The thought of walking over someone's grave...

He shivers.

He finds the grave Jonathan came to visit.

It's the only one with flowers.

"They wouldn't bury her near the church or in the cemetery we have in town."

The words startle Steve into spinning around, disturbed by the expression on Jonathan's face. He's never seen him so sad. He starts to reach a hand out, but Jonathan walks straight past him to rearrange the small bouquet of flowers that sat there.

"Her parents were moving here anyway and this was the best they could afford."

“Why wouldn’t they at least bury her near the church?”

“Because she killed herself.”

It’s only fitting that Jonathan refuses to explain the details behind the suicide. He knows Steve would never be willing to press the subject. The expression of absolute sorrow and misery he wore saw to that. There’s no way Steve could think to go about asking tactful questions, and he doesn’t want Jonathan to feel even worse.

So, laying on the air mattress near his friend’s bed, he listens to the muffled sound of Jonathan talking on the phone. From what he gathers, it’s Nancy.

“The scar won’t be so noticeable,” Steve speaks quietly.

The only way Jonathan had been able to stop Joyce from fussing over him at the hospital when he goes to get his stitches taken out is by promising to bring Steve along. He’s wise to believe Steve would be the lesser of two evils.

Steve is also very much less likely to burst into tears.

“At the very least you’ll be able to cover it up if you grow your hair out a tiny bit more. You’ll look like a chick but I guess then we’ll be in the same boat.”

He thinks Jonathan might have smiled a little.

Jonathan has gotten better after his stitches were removed. Stopped sulking. Stopped looking downright depressed. Joyce told Steve that it used to take him weeks to get back to normal after the anniversary of the late young girl whose name he learned was Leila. So he’s happy it doesn’t take so long.

It’s easier to get a smile from him.

Easier to make him laugh.

Easier to make him remember that he's human.

It's good to have him back.

Notes for the Chapter:

You'll notice that for the next couple of chapters I don't touch upon Jonathan's old classmate (who was not a past girlfriend—literally just a friend.) It's not something Jonathan wants to talk about so the subject gets dropped for a little bit, but everything about her will be explained in later chapters.

12. Chapter 12

“Jonathan!” Steve shouts as he races down the hallway as quickly as his feet will take him. “Jonathan!” He knows he’s drawing a lot of potentially bad attention, but he doesn’t give a shit. He just keeps running. “Jonathan!” People move out of the way as he runs, trying to avoid getting run over, and for once he doesn’t care. “Yo, Jonathan!” He can’t believe it. He needs to get to his friend. “Jonny-Boy!” He almost loses his footing as he rounds the corner, crashing into arms already prepared to catch him. “I got a ‘B’!”

“That’s great, Steve,” the other boy laughs. “Good job, bud.”

Steve hugs him tightly before realizing he’s making a spectacle of them, and steps back, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment. “I’m sorry, man. I know, I shouldn’t have done that. You’ve been getting too much shit—“

“It’s cool, Steve. Just—don’t talk about it. Okay? I really don’t want to think about that right now.”

“Yeah. No problem.”

And they stand in silence.

Of course Steve would make things awkward.

“I really am happy for you, Steve.”

“Oh, shit—Nancy! I gotta tell Nancy!”

And he’s running again.

He rounds the corner right as something hits a locker, and turns right back around.

He’s not letting this happen again.

He's not going to let them hurt Jonathan.

But apparently Nancy already has it handled, because she's in the boy's face screaming bloody murder at him. He takes the opportunity to move close and kneel down next to Jonathan.

When Nancy pauses to breathe, Steve interjects, "What the fuck is your problem? He hasn't done anything—"

"Hasn't done anything? Fucking fag's been lying for years!"

Steve's eyebrows draw together. "What?"

"Jonathan's a fag. Just like you."

"He's upset."

Joyce nods her head in understanding.

"I'll handle it. Why don't you go to bed? You've got school in the morning. I'll take care of Jonathan."

"Okay."

He just hopes she can get the sad expression off of Jonathan's face.

He hopes Will will stop giving the dirty looks again. All the progress he made with the kid went to shit the moment the boy found out what happened.

"Just go away!"

The shout startles Steve out of bed, and after he gets over the pain of clattering to the floor, he stands to the sound of a door slamming somewhere in the house. The pictures in the hall are still shaking by the time he gets close enough to notice, and there stands a sad and guilty looking Joyce and an angry Will.

They all exchange a look, and it's a prolonged moment before he gets

the courage to ask, “What happened?”

“This is all your fault!” Will shouts, storming to his bedroom.

“Will!” Joyce gives Steve an apologetic look before going after her youngest son. “William!”

Thunk.

Thunk.

Thunk.

“Go away.”

Thunk.

Thunk.

“Go *away*.”

Thunk.

“Mom, I don’t want to talk right now! Leave me al—“

“It’s me.”

A pause.

“Go away, Steve.”

A pause.

Silence.

And it takes every single ounce of courage to say, “No.”

More silence.

“Look, Steve, that wasn’t a request.”

“Too bad.”

Silence.

“Jonathan, let me in.”

“No!”

“Jonathan—“

“Go *away!*”

“Fine,” Steve mutters. “I’ll just sit here until you’re ready to talk.”

So he turns his back and slides down the door.

He can wait.

Movement.

He’s mildly ashamed to admit that he’s been dozing off outside the bathroom door while his best friend is potentially in need of his assistance, but after two and a half hours he really can’t help it. Quite frankly it’s boring just to sit there, doing nothing, mildly worried. But then, finally, movement.

The door opens, and he supports himself on his hands just so he won’t fall backwards onto the bathroom floor, but the motion is useless because the back of his shirt is grabbed and—“What the hell, Byers?!”—he’s dragged in.

The first thing he notices is that Jonathan isn’t wearing a shirt.

The second thing he notices is that Jonathan has a nice chest.

The third thing he notices is that his best friend has been crying.

Jonathan didn’t cry.

Not that he's ever seen.

"Jo—"

Jonathan's also never hugged him unless Steve's about to fall apart at the seams, and yet there he is, latched onto him. It's a strange role reversal.

But Steve hugs him back nonetheless, whispering comforting gibberish until he calms down.

It's only when he finally lets go that Steve notices the bruises on his chest.

"Hey, Jonathan," Steve says gently as he pokes his head in the door, smiling when he sees him fully dressed and not so sad looking. "You feeling any better?"

"Yeah."

"You...you wanna tell me what happened?"

Silence.

"Jon—"

"No. No, Steve. I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about, man."

Silence.

Silence.

Nothing but silence and breathing, and it's bothering him.

"You...uh...you wanna go out for pizza?"

Silence.

"Okay." A nod. "Yeah, I'd like that."

“Cool.”

“Your usual?”

“Yeah.”

“All right, I got this.” And Steve leaves Jonathan at the table long enough to go up and order a slice with pepperoni for him and himself. The guy behind the counter knows him by name with how often he comes in and buys food so when the guy comes back and hands him the pizza, he only charges Steve for one slice.

“You sure?” Steve asks.

“Make Jonathan happy. He needs a friend like you in his life.”

It takes some work. Four slices of pizza (three of which are free.) Three cups of soda (all of which are free.) And a go at the old fashioned pinball machine in the corner of the shop, but by closing time Jonathan seems to cheer up. His grin is back, and he drives his car himself instead of moping in the passenger's seat like he did on the way up. And as he drives them back, fingers idly tapping the wheel, Steve admits he feels a little smug.

It feels good to help.

The stars are beautiful when they step out of the car in front of the house. He doesn't particularly want to go back up, because Will has been in a foul mood since the incident, but there's no way they're sleeping in the car. No way. Simple as that.

And when they get close to the door, they see the bright red letters spray painted on it.

BURN IN HELL FAGGOTS

Jonathan runs off.

Steve just stands there in shock.

Why can't people just leave them be?

13. Chapter 13

“You okay, Steve?”

Steve looks over at Nancy, shrugs a little, looks back down at his paper. Yeah, his history homework should have been finished already, but considering what happened last night with the words spray painted on the door, he hasn’t had the time.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Steve.”

He looks up at her, smirks at her mother hen pose, and relents, “I’m worried about Jonathan.”

“That makes two of us.”

“And I think Will hates me.”

“Will’s just having a hard time right now with all the rumors going around about Jonathan.”

“And if they aren’t rumors?”

Nancy doesn’t answer for a moment, then says with a shrug, “Then they’re not rumors. That doesn’t make him any less of a man or a human being.”

“I know, Nance. I just wish everyone else would realize that.”

“Hey, guys.”

“Hey, Jonathan.” Nancy smiles, turning to hug the young man when she freezes. “Damn. You look like you didn’t get any sleep at all!”

“Rough night.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

He sits down across from Steve, pushes a can of soda to him for which Steve gratefully takes and slurps. Jonathan looks so uncomfortable, and before he manages to open his mouth and ask, his friend is leaning on Nancy’s shoulder.

“You wanna come over today?”

“Huh? Yeah. Sure. Why?”

His mouth says, “To celebrate Steve’s birthday.” But his eyes clearly say, *Everything’s fucked up right now. You’re the only normal thing in my life. Save me.*

They watch bad movies.

They eat bad pizza.

They drink bad beer.

They enjoy themselves quite thoroughly.

It’s the camaraderie that makes the night, not the entertainment or refreshments. Steve’s liked Nancy since he first met her—that’s no secret—but his love for her grows immensely when he sees the way she makes Jonathan glow. She’s known him forever, and because of that she knows exactly how to handle him when he’s in a bad mood. Or it simply could have been that her presence, happy most of the time, could make anyone happy.

“To Steve!”

“To Steve!” Nancy echoes, holding her can of beer high above her head. “To Steve and the ‘B’ he managed to score on his test—finally.”

Steve smirks and holds up the beer. “To me.” Pause. “To all of us.”

His family.

Steve can hear Nancy making a little sound in her sleep on the bed above him. He concentrates on the adorable noise. He tries to pay attention to anything but the warm body tossing and turning next to him.

Jonathan.

Sleeping.

In his bed.

With him.

Jonathan had been very kind, offering to share the air mattress with Steve so Nancy could have the bed, but he certainly didn't seem very comfortable.

“Jonathan?” Steve whispers into the darkness, reaping the young man is awake when he stops moving at the sound of his name. “You okay, man?”

“Yeah. I'm fine.”

“You've been tossing for an hour and a half now.”

“Sorry. Am I keeping you up? I can go sleep with Will—”

“This is your room. I can go sleep on the couch—”

“It's your room too Steve.”

This catches Steve by surprise, and he turns to see Jonathan staring at him, the light from the window making his eyes seem to glow.

“This isn't my house,” Steve murmurs.

“And me and mom told you that you could live with us, so it's your

house too.”

“I’m not paying any of the bills.”

“That’s okay. When you get a job you can.”

“But what if I don’t get a job?”

“You’re *getting* a job.”

Steve chortles as quietly as possible as the boy deadpanned, looking over and finding his expression all the more humorous when his lips quiver in an attempt not to smile.

“Yes, sir.”

He wakes up to a toe poking him in the shoulder. Cracking one eye open reveals Nancy, grinning, with a camera in her hands. “Say cheese,” she whispers. In confusion he opens his mouth to ask and looks down in time to realize that she’s going to take a picture of him and Jonathan with Jonathan’s camera.

Immediately he pulls the blanket up over their heads so when she takes the picture it’s messed up. He knows it’s messed up because she mutters a curse and kicks the top of his head gently.

“Jerk.”

”I can't resist you either, Nance.”

“Hey, Jonathan?” Steve murmurs, shaking the shoulder resting on his chest as gently as he can. “Jonathan. Wakey-wakey.”

“Mmmnrr?”

“Yeah, it’s morning. Time to get up. We have class soon.”

“Csss?”

“Yeah. Class. Up.” He pushes the shoulder a little more firmly, forces the boy to sit up, and holds him there until he’s assured he won’t just fall down as soon as he lets go. “Come on, man. Even if we want to skip, we can’t mess up Nancy’s grades.”

“S’ttrue.”

“Yeah. Go get yourself ready before she comes back in here with your camera.”

“My camera?!”

“It’s snowing!” Nancy cries so loudly, Steve nearly loses his damn footing and kills himself walking from school. They’d all stayed behind for some intense math study time, and the sun is almost all the way down before they get to the side of the school that let out in the student parking lot.

And it’s snowing.

The girl bursts through the doors, running to where the snow is gathering at the top of Jonathan’s car in the distance. She’s like a five year old child sometimes and it makes Steve smiles.

Steve grabs a handful of snow from the outside sill to throw in Jonathan’s face. The boy jerks back and away from him, blinking in a sort of shock before staring at him for a minute. Steve’s hard pressed not to laugh hysterically at the look on his face.

“What the hell, man?!”

“Something wrong?”

They stare at each other.

Steve gets out of his seat just a second before Jonathan stands and chases him through the library, out of the room, into the parking lot shouting, “You’re dead!”

Steve manages to run faster than the boy in the school, but once his feet hit the slippery asphalt he finds that he has no traction, and has to significantly slow his pace in order to not fall and kill himself. That's all well and good...except Jonathan obviously doesn't have the same problem.

He catches up to Steve within seconds of hitting the student lot. He grabs his sweater once, a grip Steve squirms out of only momentarily. Steve's sides hurting from the strength of his laughter probably doesn't help.

They crash to the ground, and immediately Steve starts struggling. He flails his arms in an attempt to dislodge Jonathan until he grabs Steve's wrists and holds them to the floor. Steve's too busy laughing to really fight him off.

"So, you're ticklish, huh, Harrington?"

"I swear to God, Byers, I will kick your—AHH!"

And he wiggles violently, trying with renewed vigor to Jonathan off of him.

Tears are running down his face.

Jonathan's eyes are bright with his smile.

"You're kinda cute like this."

Steve stops laughing suddenly, smile falling as he stares up into brown eyes. Did he...did he just call him cute? Jonathan? He...well... he understands that Jonathan doesn't like him or anything, even with the suggestive position he has him in. Because when one finds a weakness it's only fair to exploit it. But calling someone—anyone—cute means something. And he just...

Steve tries to push his arms up, but Jonathan still has his hands pinned above his head.

He's watching Steve.

Carefully.

His lips are warm.

His eyes inviting as they slide closed. Steve keeps his open, mostly in the shock from the fact that Jonathan's kissing him. Jonathan is *kissing* him. How...damn it, how often has he dreamed of this? How long has he wanted it, and now it's happening.

He let's his eyes close, slipping his arms out of Jonathan's loosened grip to put them tentatively around his neck.

He's in heaven.

14. Chapter 14

“Fuck!”

Steve’s eyes flutter open. The loose grip he has around Jonathan’s neck is broken as Jonathan stumbles off and away from him. Dazed, all Steve manages to do is stare for a good minute. A good long minute before he realizes that Jonathan doesn’t look nearly as happy as he feels.

“Jonathan?”

“I-I-I’m sorry, man!” Jonathan mutters, scrambling to his feet and walking away without so much as offering a hand to help Steve up. “That was a mistake.”

Steve’s stomach drops so fast that he’s afraid it falls out of his body.

He sits in the snow, watching Jonathan—his crush, his roommate, his best friend—walk away like he’s committed some mortal sin. Jonathan only looks back at him once, and the moment he does he speeds up his pace, disappearing into the building without another word.

It was a mistake.

Kissing Steve was a mistake.

He lays back down in the snow, in the middle of the parking lot, half hoping that someone will run him over. At least then it’ll save him an awkward drive home with him. If he can even call it home. He should have known...

The street lights flicker on before he finally pulls himself up off the ground. Part of him had been hoping that Jonathan would come back

out and apologize. Say that he was wrong. He hasn't expected to kiss him, and so he was shocked...But never comes back out so Steve leaves. There's no point in making Jonathan suffer because of his presence. No point of anything.

"I'll find somewhere else to sleep tonight," he informs a cold gust of wind. So he does.

He can't go back to the house. He most certainly can't go home. He can't bother Nancy with something that wasn't her problem—especially since she'd get the story out of him, and that would bother Jonathan even more. He's suddenly struck by the fact he has two friends in the entire town, and he can't really rely on either of them at the moment. So he discovers why it is that homeless people always seem to find twenty four hour places to sleep or rest in.

At least they're heated.

He almost walks past it, but as someone exits and the door let's out a blast of warm air, he can't help but enter the bus terminal a little absently. He looks around, sees a few benches tone one side and large desk on the other that has a smiling woman staring at him with a tilted head. He didn't realize how long he'd been standing there until she calls out, "Sir?"

"Huh?"

"Can I help you?"

He looks around, realizes that he can get kicked out of the place, and watches a bus pull away.

"Sir?"

"What bus just left?" He asks when the woman starts to look a little worried. And immediately her face lights up in one of those welcoming smiles that only girls can do.

"The bus to New York City, sir." They stare at each other, him not quite standing in front of the desk and her just sort of...watching him. It looks as though she doesn't know whether to be concerned by his presence or not. "Sir...?"

"I'm sorry. That...was my bus. When does the next one get in?"

"Not for a few hours."

"You mind if I wait here?"

There's no point in lying by saying he has a good night. He spends the entire time in the terminal half asleep, half worried that someone's going to call the cops on the sleepy kid, sitting on the smallest bench, in the furthest corner. He's afraid that someone will recognize him. Hurt him. Something. He's...afraid.

Afraid and ashamed, because for some reason his preferences always seemed to mess things up for him. Everything. It's his fault, it always has been, and he's afraid.

He's...never been homeless before.

"Jesus Christ!" The cry startled him into a jump. "You're blue in the face. Get inside!"

*He only murmured a thanks and stumbled in. Mildly confused as to who was answering the door. No one ever answered the door but **him**. Who is this woman? Why was she letting him into the house? Where is **he**? He's supposed to meet him.*

"You must be Steve," the woman says, placing a warm mug—cocoa—into his hands. "Seth's told me a lot about you."

"He has?"

"He has." A blanket was draped over his shoulders next. "I'm his mother."

"I..." Didn't know what to say. "I...I hope at least some of what he said has been good."

"Some of it!" The woman laughed loudly. "He bloody fawns over you, dear one. Drink your cocoa."

Obediently he took a sip, hoping he could hide the developing flush behind the mug. Almost as though she knew his embarrassment, the woman didn't look at him again until his face was back to its normal color. And then she started up again, "That's more like it, son! You look like a human again. What were you doing out in the cold anyway?"

"Waiting for Seth," Steve murmured quietly. Trying to end the conversation by taking another drink.

"He made you wait out—" The woman stopped her shock and bellowed. "Seth! Get your butt down here!"

"Mom?" Called tentatively from another room. "Kinda busy!"

"And I'm here entertaining your boyfriend!"

There was silence, and then Steve thinks the man may have crashed into a wall trying to get to the front room, breathing, "Steve?"

"I, uh...I didn't meant to interrupt."

"Nonsense," his mother soothes. "You're not interrupting anything. Seth. Care to explain yourself?"

He ignored mother and walked straight up to Steve, wrapping his arms in a tight embrace so he could say, "I'm so sorry, bud. I—my sister...there's a situation. I completely forgot."

"Is everything alright?" Steve asked tentatively. He knew his sister. She was a good kid.

"Yeah. Her pig boyfriend is being a pig."

"Can I help?"

"I don't..." the man sighed, rubbed his eyes. "It's not—"

“Seth!” A delicate voice called. “Seth? What’s—Steve!” And he was enveloped in another hug as Seth was pushed to the side. “Steve! He was with another girl!” And Steve helped to soothe her.

“Sir?” He hears murmures somewhere to the side, and jerks away, only to see the concerned looking young woman from earlier. “Sir, I was calling you. You just missed the next bus.”

And he tries to look appropriately alarmed at the woman’s words, but he’s too tired to react beyond a blink and a grunt. “You’re kidding?” He murmurs at the woman’s raised eyebrows. “Again?”

“Is there somewhere you can stay for the night?”

“I was staying with a friend, it’s...” He looks up at the clock, sees that it’s almost midnight. “Too too late to go back.”

The woman leaves after that, giving up her post to a man that looks old enough to be his dad, and requests that the man go over and wake Steve up when the next bus comes. He’s already missed two.

He finds him casting pitying glances over at him from time to time, and Steve almost swallows his tongue to keep quiet. Why is the old guy looking at him? Why does he have to be looking at him? It would be so much better if he just forgets he exists. And, then, he’s dozing again.

“I really am sorry about that, Steve.”

“Nothing to be sorry about, man,” Steve said, smiling. Their date may have gone...differently than expected, but he found himself oddly attached to Seth’s family since really meeting them. He’d always known them. They’d gone to school together since the third grade, and his sister was always just a year below them, but he hadn’t gotten to know them until they started...

“Really, I don’t know what got into her—“

"Forget about it," and Steve kissed him to let him know he was serious. "She was upset. I get it."

"She really likes you, you know?"

*He looked over at Seth, parked in front of the house, in the pouring rain. None of the lights were on, so he figured his parents were out, but as always **he** was holding back. No untoward touching. No questionable comments. Sometimes he wanted to inform **him** that he wasn't a woman, **he** doesn't need to court him.*

"Well..." Steve shrugged. "I better get going. We can try again next weekend."

"Let me walk you to your door."

They almost got all the way to the door too!

*And then he says that Steve looked silly with his hair clinging to his face like that, and he said **he** looked silly with a face like that, and they exchanged insults until next thing he knew, they were kissing. The rain was pouring, cold, and **his** lips were the most wonderful things he'd ever have the pleasure of experiencing. Even better than Sarah Langford who he dated two years ago.*

His arms wrapped around Steve's shoulders gently.

*He leaned into **his** touch.*

*He loved **him**.*

But they hadn't heard the car pull up, and his mother catches them.

It's barely worth notice that he sleeps even worse with the older man in charge of the area, and almost hits the ceiling when at three in the morning he taps Steve's arm and tells him the bus is here. He needs to get in line if he wants a seat.

...He has no ticket.

He nods at the old man anyway, and is quick to duck away and out the door that was indicated. He wants to savor the feeling left by his dream-reenacted memory. He wants to savor it untainted but the cold truth of the world.

He is alone.

He hadn't realized he needed a ticket to get on the bus, and while there are people paying as they walk up to the man in charge, he knows he doesn't have enough money. So the moment he gets away from the door and windows of the terminal, he gets out of line and walks back into the dark town.

The small town.

The town that has no homeless shelter because it's too small to have homeless.

School doesn't start for four hours.

So he walks.

What does it mean to be alone?

Is he alone because Seth is gone? He's been gone for a long while yet. Over a year now. The pain may be fresh in his mind, but his body is in no way fresh in the ground. He hates to think of it like that but...it's true. He's not...he's not alone because without him.

The realization hits him suddenly. Violently. He feels his body list to the side, and has to touch a wall to steady himself.

He's...he's not alone? Lonely maybe. Sad. Vacant. Distant. But...not alone.

Somehow, in the freezing cold, his feet brings him to the vacant lot Jonathan had taken him to. It's sort of freeing to be here. By himself but not alone. He can't stop playing with the same thought. There are people everywhere around him. All the time. He may not be with anyone specifically, but...he doesn't need to be.

The thought gives him some kind of high. And though he can't feel his nose by the time seven in the morning comes around, he feels better than he has in months. Better because he notices that the constant niggling guilt in the back of his head is gone. And while it's odd for it not to be there, it's relieving.

And then he walks into school, and is greeted by an elbow to the gut and a murmured, "Morning, fag," and the feeling is back. As though he never had a revelation at all.

The last thing he wants to do is walk into first period in yesterday's clothing, praying that nobody notices. The last thing he wants to do is take the goddamn math test when he hasn't gotten a good night's sleep. It's only one night but it feels like months since he's slept.

He misses sleep.

"Are you feeling okay, Steve?"

He just kind of looks at the teacher blankly, gets an odd sense of fulfillment when the man recoils.

Steve probably looks like shit.

"Good luck."

He takes his seat.

The last thing he wants to do is turn a corner in order to avoid Nancy. The last thing he wants to do is duck into the boy's bathroom when Nancy sees and follows him anyway. The last thing he wants to do is end up stuck somewhere between embarrassed and ashamed when Nancy kicks all of the boys out of the bathroom so she can talk to him in private. All he knows is that he can't cry in front of her, no matter what. He doesn't want her to know.

And he's a naive, stupid boy who thought he could actually keep a secret from a girl like Nancy. Really? Even if he didn't know Nancy, even if she wasn't his best friend, he should know that there's no way he can keep anything from her.

The girl is willing to sit on the floor with him so they can talk.

He doesn't even know any guys who are willing to sit on the floor in the men's bathroom.

And he wanted to keep a secret?

"Oh, Steve," the girl murmurs, head resting on his shoulder as he stares blankly across the room. "I'm so sorry."

"Sorry for what? You didn't do anything."

"But still—"

"Nothing to be sorry about. He...made a mistake."

"You can't pretend this doesn't bother you."

"I'm not pretending."

"Ste—"

"I admit that it's bothering me. But...there's nothing I can do about it. He made a mistake and...if you could just go over to his house and get my stuff, I'll owe you big time."

"But Steve—"

“He’s not going to want me there anymore.”

“But—“

“Please, Nance?”

The steps of the school feel cold. Like blocks of ice fusing the back of his legs to them. And he knows that though he cleared most of the snow away with a sweep of his arm, the ice that remained is probably soaking through his pants. And it still doesn’t matter. Nancy will be here soon with his stuff, and then he’ll have money, and...something.

What does he expect? A hundred dollars isn’t going to do anything for him. No, it’ll buy him a ticket to New York, but what is he going to do there...?

He may have the money to get into Manhattan, but beyond that he’s broke. It’s not like he can get money front his parents like he used to. He doesn’t have enough money to make it back home, and even if he did...his friendships have been strained since...

He rubs his eyes furiously.

He tells himself, firmly, that he’s going to take his stuff and...do something. Anything. He just doesn’t need to be in school. He doesn’t. What’s a stupid high school diploma gonna do for him? He’s not good at most things. Who will hire him?

“Steve?”

He looks up.

“Did you get my stuff?” He asks the suspiciously unburdened Nancy, and raises an eyebrow when she kicks shamefacedly at the ground. “You didn’t get my stuff,” he murmurs.

“Will wouldn’t let me take it.”

“What?”

"I packed all of your stuff up, but Will wouldn't let me leave with it."

"Why?"

"He said...if you're going to leave...he said you need to come get your things yourself instead of just disappearing."

He sighs, rubbing his eyes again, and stands. "Fine. I'll go get my shit myself."

Will doesn't say a word to him at first, just waves vaguely in the direction of Jonathan's bedroom. When Steve stands there and stares blankly at him, Will says, "Your things are in there, dummy."

Steve makes a dismissive noise and walks in that direction, walking into the room and staring awkwardly at Jonathan, sitting at his desk, staring at him in shock.

"Steve?"

He turns to leave the room, only to have the door suddenly slammed shut in his face.

"We're not letting you guys out until you've made up!" Will calls from outside of the door.

Steve stares at the door for a moment. Listens to the silence in the room behind him. Contemplates climbing from the window.

"Steve, I...I'm sorry. I—"

"I don't wanna hear it, Byers."

"But I—"

"It was a mistake. I get it. Let's not talk about this now."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"What other way could you mean it?"

“Steve—“

“I don’t wanna talk about it. I don’t...I...I just want to get my stuff and go.”

“Where?” He hears Jonathan ask as his chair scrapes across the ground. The younger boy’s getting up. Steve hopes he doesn’t come to him. “Where are you going to go?”

“Away.”

“Where? You can’t go back home. You don’t have enough money to travel, and your dad has your car. What are you going to do?”

“Something. I’ll...just go.”

“Steve.”

“Let me leave.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I still want you.”

Steve doesn’t let his heart soar. If he does than he’ll just get hurt again, because that’s what always happens. He lets his hopes get too high, and it hurts so much more when someone stomps on them. He thought he made friends with a guy who doesn’t care about his sexual orientation. He thought he made friends with a guy who could like him the way he likes Jonathan. He thought maybe things would be okay. It turns out he’s just a mistake.

He’s always a mistake.

He can never be anything but a mistake.

“You’re not a mistake.”

Steve leans his head forward, rests his forehead against the door when Jonathan’s hand comes to grip his shoulder. He can tell by the

slight pressure his friend applies that's he's trying to coax him into turning around, but he won't turn. He can't turn. He needs to count his breath to keep calm as it is, he doesn't think he can handle a face to face conversation.

But when the man finally realizes that Steve isn't willing to look at him, his hand drops, and almost instantly both arms wrap around his waist. His face presses into his neck.

"I'm sorry. You're not a mistake," Jonathan breathes into his back. "I've only ever kissed a girl before, so I...Look, I care about you, Steve. But I'm not ready for a relationship right now with everything going on. I'm still trying to figure out what I am. Kissing you was an impulse, and I was afraid I was giving you the wrong idea. I know you like me...liked me. I guess...you probably don't anymore. And I'm sorry—"

"I still like you."

"What?"

Steve's mouth gets away from him.

But he won't take it back.

"Don't make me say it again."

He feels Jonathan smile.

"So will you stay?"

Steve doesn't respond. Can't respond. Because maybe Jonathan admits that he shouldn't have said what he did. Maybe he apologizes. And maybe Steve believes him. But...it still hurts. It's hurt a hell of a lot, and so, quietly, he shakes his head. He can't stay.

"You have to."

He can't.

"You can't go."

He has to. “I can’t stay—“

“Just for the rest of the week!”

Steve sighs, and thinks about arguing until his lack of options really sink in. There’s literally no other option. “Fine.”

“The rest of the week” turns into “the rest of the weekend” that turns into “until Christmas.” And because Jonathan can play him with a poker face, Steve agrees. He doesn’t realize what he’s agreeing to until Jonathan is grinning sheepishly in the wake of Steve’s glare.

And Steve’s trying so hard to stay mad at him, because he deserves to be angry with him. He hurt him, and it’s his right to be mad at him. But every time he works himself up, Jonathan does something nice. He should have him. But he can’t.

He doesn’t.

The only way he finds himself able to display his anger is by refusing to sleep in Jonathan’s room with him. He hates for Steve to sleep on the couch, but even when he offers to stay in the living room so Steve could have the bedroom, Steve refuses. He’s going to sleep on the lumpy couch to get back at him. Never mind it’s incredibly uncomfortable, and they all know it...by the time winter break is starting he’s seriously contemplating forgiving Jonathan just so he can sleep on the air mattress again.

15. Chapter 15

“Merry Christmas!” Joyce says cheerfully, embracing both her sons before hugging Steve.

“Merry Christmas,” the boys say. Jonathan and Steve rub sleep from their eyes while Will excitedly plops down on the couch.

“Charlie Brown is coming on!”

Will, apparently, watches the Charlie Brown Christmas special every Christmas before opening gifts. Steve insists that they watch the original, Dr. Seuss’ *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

“You won’t get him to watch anything before this,” Jonathan laughs. Joyce brings them all in hot cocoa and takes a seat.

“So, Steve, what do you like to do on Christmas?”

A good question.

An excellent question.

One he can’t seem to answer.

“Did you guys not celebrate Christmas?” Joyce asks quietly when ten minutes and two promptings later Steve still hasn’t shared his Christmas tradition.

“My mother and I did,” he murmurs.

“Not...your dad?”

“He hated the holiday. Said it was all about presents...and stuff.”

“Isn’t it?” Will pipes up.

“I wasn’t worth spending the money on.”

No one says anything, but Jonathan touches his arm.

“You’re worth more than you think,” he says softly.

After several hours worth of bad Christmas movies and opening the few presents they each had, Will decides he doesn't want to stay in any longer. "It's not too cold," he reasons with them. "But there's plenty of snow to have snowballs fight with." When Jonathan looks unconvinced Will begs, "Please?"

"Will, it's *still* cold."

"Please?"

"And it's wet because the snow's melting, because it's not *too* cold."

"Please?"

"Can't you just go play with your new toys or something?"

"*Please?!*"

"Will, I really don't—"

Will clasps his hands together and leans close to his brother.

"*Please?!*"

"...Fine."

Steve should have known this day was coming.

He, Jonathan, Joyce and Will are in one of the only restaurants open on Christmas. Jonathan tells him it's only because the owner is Jewish. They're mainly here because Joyce isn't much of a cook and Steve is the one paying, as he feels it's the least he can do right now since he's not paying bills yet.

And then it happens.

"I don't want to go into any fucking Jewish place!"

"But dear, it's the only place open!"

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have burned dinner.”

“I didn’t!”

“What? Did it magically burn itself?”

Will looks at Steve, nudges him, asks, “Steve?”

“Dad.”

Jonathan tenses and his fists clench. Will blinks in surprise at his brother’s reaction and Steve has to put an arm out to stop his friend from doing anything rash. Joyce is glaring at the man with a deadly expression.

He wants to disappear. He doesn’t want his father to notice him. He doesn’t want to hear whatever snide comments the man had to make. He doesn’t want him to ruin his Christmas.

He closes his eyes and looks down at the ground to hide his face.

It’s useless.

“Well if it isn’t the queer boy!”

Steve’s mother freezes midstep as Jonathan reaches for his hand. He knows he’s beginning to hyperventilate even before Jonathan switches hands and wraps an arm around his shoulders to pull Steve into his side. Steve’s anger towards him is gone immediately.

“Dear,” his mother says, “maybe we should just—“

“No,” the man insists with a laugh. “I think I’d *love* to eat here.”

Steve wants to die.

“Kill me.”

“Steve...”

“I’m begging you, Jonathan. Kill me. Please.”

“You’re exaggerating, man.”

If being one remark away from possibly breaking down is exaggerating, yeah. Yeah, he is. But Jonathan holds him firmly to his side, and it makes him feel a little better as the owner, a small old woman, brings over actual food. It’s chicken, delicious looking. Looking at it makes his mouth water, but as the old woman goes over to serve his parents, hearing his father order pork makes his mouth go dry just as quickly.

“Excuse me, sir?”

“Pork. I want pork.”

“Sir...” Steve can hear barely restrained sarcasm in the old woman’s voice as she says, “Unless you missed the Menorah in the window...this is a Jewish establishment.”

“Yeah. A food establishment. One where you work, and I eat, and I want pork.”

“Dear—“

“Shut up.”

Steve wants to kick him for talking to his mother like that, but looks down at his food instead. He knows better than to get involved with the man. He knows the pain his father can cause without any effort.

Joyce, however, does not share his reservations.

“Sir,” she sighs, turning her seat to speak very calmly to Steve’s father. “You speak to her like that again, and I’ll have you thrown out like the piece of trash you are.”

“Oh?” His father turns around to look at the group of them, and the only thing keeping Steve from crawling under the table is the fact that Jonathan’s holding him firmly in place. “And who are you? The other fag’s mother?” He nods at Jonathan with a smirk.

For a good second there, Steve’s a little afraid that Joyce is going to rip the man’s head off.

“I am his mother, yes,” Joyce says, voice just above a whisper, an eerily calm whisper. “And if you ever talk about my son—*or* your son—like that again in my presence, I’ll—“

“I’ll kill you,” Jonathan interrupts with barely controlled anger in his voice.

“Well, at least your soap dropping muscles are ready for prison.”

For a very long time no one moves. Not a single one of them know how to react to the comment, and Steve turns from Jonathan in shame. To think this man had a hand in him being born. To think he’s related to him. He’s ashamed.

He’s startled by the sound of flesh on flesh.

Head snapping up, Steve’s no less shocked to find Joyce on her feet, shoulders squared, hand still raised from where she backhanded the man.

“Who the hell do you think you are, bitch?!”

“My name is Joyce Byers. And I can assure you that if you ever talk to them like that again, we won’t have to worry about jail. There won’t be a body to prove murder with.”

“Oh? So you think you can threaten me?”

“I’m not threatening you, Mr. Harrington. I’m promising you that if you disrespect my boys like that again, you’ll—“

For a second, Steve can’t believe it.

That man he...he...Joyce is sitting there on the ground, hand over her cheek, staring in shock as the old woman backs up to where the phone hangs by the counter.

His father hit Joyce.

“Listen here, you little bitch—“

Before Jonathan or Will can react, Steve’s shooting out of his seat and

stomping over to his father. He hears Jonathan call his name, but he ignores it. Before he can stop himself, he's pulling his fists back and punching the man square in the teeth.

His father stumbles back, hand raised to his mouth as Steve glares.

"You stupid little fag—"

"You never hit a woman."

"You think that just because you don't live under my roof—"

"No!" He's pleased to see the man cringe just slightly from him when he shouts. "Where I live doesn't matter. Who I sleep with doesn't matter. What matters is the fact that you're a pig, and if I ever see you lay your hands on her again, I'll snap them off. Get out!"

"You little—"

"Get! Out!"

His father leaves.

Joyce is hugging him right as his knees give out, and he's sitting on the ground in the middle of the diner stuck somewhere between satisfaction and hyperventilation. The thought of finally standing up to his father is overwhelming, and he feels he might cry as Joyce kisses him on the head, saying something about how everything's gonna be okay and she's proud of him.

Hands under his arms pull him up from the ground and shoves him back into the booth where Jonathan's pushing a glass of water to his lips, murmuring, "I'm proud of you, too."

"That. Was. Awesome!" Will cries.

Steve takes the glass from his grip, feeling the glory of the moment is undermined by being fed like a child. "Thanks," he says after a good gulp. "I..." He turns to Joyce. "Did he hurt you?" He finds he can't speak in more than a whisper, so ashamed of the man and his

actions. “I swear if he hurt you—“

“I’m fine, Steve. I think you did more than enough for today.”

“But he—”

“I’m fine, sweetheart. Thank you.”

He’s not given a choice but to accept the assurance when someone walks in, wearing a hat and a badge that says he’s the chief. The man walks over casually to the old woman, tips his hat at her. “Happy Chanukah, Mrs. Baumann.”

“Chief Hopper.”

“What seems to be the trouble this fine day, ma’am?” He’s not sure if anyone else notices the slight boredom in Hopper’s voice with a hint of sarcasm as well.

“Some man hit poor Joyce.”

Hopper turns to Joyce, finally noticing them, and his eyes widen slightly. “Jesus, Joyce.”

“I’m fine, Hop.”

“Lonnie back?”

“No. Different man.”

Hopper curses, reaches a hand out to touch Joyce’s cheek tenderly. “What the hell happened?”

“He was bothering Jonathan and his friend, Steve.”

“Steve?” Steve shrinks back under the man’s gaze when he moves to look at him, the new kid in town. Hopper doesn’t spend much time looking however, except for Steve’s knuckles that has blood on them. “Care to explain?”

“I, uh...” Is he really supposed to tell a cop he punched a man in the face?

“He punched the bastard for hitting mom,” Jonathan comes to his aid and speaks for him.

“He was calling Jonathan and Steve fags,” Will adds.

And the chief just looks at Steve a bit harder, and for a moment the boy is certain he’s gonna be arrested, and then, “Good job, kid. Don’t ever punch a guy with your knuckles though—does too much damage.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

“You wanna press charges, Joyce?”

Joyce looks at Steve.

She wants him to make this decision. So he shakes his head.

“No, Hop. I’m sure it won’t happen again.”

“Better not,” Steve hears Hopper growl under his breath. And it’s not until he sees the way the man looks at Joyce that he understands why.

Will and Jonathan waits for the chief to leave before pouncing on their mother, demanding to know why she doesn’t want to file a report. “He could have been locked up, Mom!” Will tells her.

“I know.”

“Then why—“

“I didn’t want her to,” Steve sighs.

“Steve?!”

“I’m not going to go running to the cops with my tail between my

legs.”

“Steve—“ Jonathan starts.

“I won’t!”

“...Okay. Fair enough.”

“You should probably get going,” the old woman speaks softly, leaning in to give them each a kiss before handing them bags to put their food in. “It’s been a long day, and I rather feel like a good old nap myself. Go on. Enjoy the night.”

So they leave.

No one speaks a word the whole way home.

Joyce and Will head to their rooms.

It’s just Jonathan and Steve now.

Steve goes straight to the bathroom where Jonathan can’t confront him.

He’s not ready for that.

The shower can’t wash away the pain of the abrupt meeting with his father, no matter how hot the water is. It scalds his skin, but doesn’t make him feel any better. His father had been the one to teach him to never hit a girl, and with Joyce, sweet, loving, Joyce being the victim...Steve snapped.

He doesn’t get out of the bathroom when Will knocks lazily on the door, muttering something about Jonathan wanting to know if he wants his food heated up. He doesn’t leave when Jonathan knocks, begging Steve to speak to him. Steve can’t. Not when, after finally gathering the courage to look at himself in the mirror, he only sees his father’s eyes.

Is he going to become like him? Is he going to hit, shout and hurt

every time he gets angry? The thought of it makes him sick.

16. Chapter 16

Throwing up is never a pleasant feeling, least of all when the whole day has been filled with sweet treats and hot cocoa. Cocoa is never good coming back up. Ever. Especially with marshmallows. But clearing the food seems to clear him of whatever demon has taken over his mind—that or it exhausts him too much to allow him to worry over it much longer.

And, when he finally opens the door, Jonathan isn't standing there waiting for him. He's pleased by this, almost as much as he is disappointed. How long has he been in there? *Does it even matter?*

He settles down on the couch with a sigh, not looking forward to another night on the lumpy thing. There's nothing he can do about it though. After such a long day he can already hear Will snoring from his room, and guesses Jonathan is doing the same—only quieter. That's fine by him. He prefers to be alone right now. He's tired. Very tired. Not just his body, but his mind.

So he slaps the pillow into place and closes his eyes.

“Steve?”

Steve sits straight up.

“Jonathan?”

The last thing he expects to see when he opens his eyes is the young man standing, staring through the darkness from over by the wall. He looks uncertain, uncomfortable just standing there. But Steve doesn't know where to begin to cheer him up. He just wants to pass out, fulfill the urge he had since his dad.

“Jonathan, what—“

“Come to bed.”

He freezes, unsure of what to make of the gently spoken command.

“I...I *am*—“

“A real bed. The air mattress. My bed. I don’t care. I...just don’t want you sleeping out here anymore.”

Steve doesn’t know what to say to this. Instinctively he wants to do exactly what Jonathan says. He knows the bed is comfortable, recognizes this fact from half remembered fever dreams. He knows the air mattress is comfortable. Anything is more comfortable than the couch. But his stomach clenches when he remembers that he’ll be moving out soon. He said he’d only stay until Christmas.

“I don’t care if you still want to move out,” the boy blurts, informing Steve that he’s spoken his thoughts out loud. “I...you...shouldn’t be alone. It’s Christmas.”

“Jonathan—“

“Don’t make me beg.”

Jonathan stares at Steve.

Steve stares at Jonathan.

Should he have gone for the air mattress instead?

He looks down at the bed, and wonders what compelled him to sit there. Jonathan said he can sleep wherever he wants, but the boy didn’t mean it. He meant that he wants Steve on the air mattress so he doesn’t have to worry about him. So he can sleep peacefully.

Steve knows he has to get up, but...

He wants to sleep in the bed.

He’s an idiot.

“Steve?”

Here it comes.

“Should I sleep on the air mattress then?”

What?

He looks over at the boy, unsure of how exactly he’s supposed to take that question. Is he giving him an option? Is he letting Steve sleep in his bed? Is he...asking him if he can sleep with him?

Steve doesn’t hold his breath.

“If you want to.”

He purposefully leaves it as ambiguous as possible.

Jonathan can do what he wants to from here.

Steve lays back, rolls over, and closes his eyes so he won’t have to panic until Jonathan finally makes his decision.

He’s not going to hope.

Even though he is.

Choose me.

It’s a plea.

When the mattress behind him depresses, he nearly lets out a sigh of relief. But he doesn’t, no. He manages to keep his cool as the boy slides into bed behind him, pausing before he’s halfway under the sheet to ask, “Is this...is this okay?”

It hits Steve that Jonathan’s nervous. And suddenly he feels like he’s being cruel, and rolls over to face him slowly, just opening his eyes to look at his face. Jonathan’s staring at him intently. Afraid. Afraid of rejection. From Steve.

Is it okay?

"It's...great."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

He sits up and moves so he's not laying on top of the blankets anymore. Slides under them before Jonathan gets a chance to. And he admits he enjoys the disconcerted look Jonathan has about him right before he slides in next to him.

Steve told him it's okay, but Jonathan's still not sure. He still doesn't know. Maybe he doesn't believe that Steve likes him. That Steve *still* likes him, even after everything that's happened. Well, Steve *does* still like him.

He especially likes him when Jonathan can't figure out where to put his hands. His eyes dart about nervously as he rolls onto his back and crosses them over his chest. Discovers that it's uncomfortable to sleep that way and rolls over towards Steve, panics and rolls in the other direction, panics further when he almost falls out of bed.

"Jonathan, dude," Steve speaks quietly, but as firmly as he can, smiling only a little when his friend glances over his shoulder at him. "Is this really so bad?"

"I—"

"Uncomfortable?"

"Yes."

"Should I go?"

"No!"

Steve smiles.

"It's not uncomfortable," the other boy murmurs. Pauses. Shakes his head. "You're not uncomfortable. I...I should go—"

"Why?"

“I...”

“We’re not uncomfortable, right?” Steve suddenly isn’t so sure what to say, what he’s trying to accomplish. “We...” He doesn’t know what to say to make things better, but...he really doesn’t want Jonathan to leave. He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and tries, “This won’t be the first time we’ve slept in the same bed. It’s...nothing special.”

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

Jonathan relaxes, just a little.

It works.

Steve can’t believe it works.

The next step is actually making Jonathan comfortable. Physically. It’s getting him settled so that maybe he can sleep. Steve just...doesn’t know how to do that.

This time is different from the last time they slept on the air mattress together. He can feel that it is. He likes Jonathan...and maybe Jonathan likes him. Maybe he doesn’t.

Steve just wants to be comfortable, and safe, just for one last night.

One night before he leaves.

Jonathan rolls over, faces him. Steve smiles and nods that it’s okay. Jonathan smiles back, uncrosses his arms. He still doesn’t know what to do with his hands.

Steve watches him fidget, and feels his stomach twist. It’s like watching a puppy get kicked, but worse. It’s like watching *your own* puppy get kicked. Savagely. A puppy that you love. A puppy that you love more than you love yourself.

He takes a deep breath.

Rolls over.

Scoots back.

Settles his back against Jonathan's chest.

Waits to see if the other boy will be angry or not.

Jonathan isn't.

There's a moment of tension. Neither of them know what to do. Then Steve can feel the tension melt from Jonathan's chest, and one hand hesitantly moves from his side, to Steve's arm. They just lay there, back to chest, with Jonathan's hand wrapped nervously around the older boy's elbow.

Every few seconds his fingers will flex, like he wants to move. But he won't. Doesn't. Can't?

They are at a standstill.

A cliff.

On one side lay happiness, the other oblivion.

Why is Steve being poetic now?

"Damn, I'm tired."

Jonathan laughs. "Yeah. So am I."

That breaks the ice.

Jonathan's fingers relax along Steve's arm.

The slide down, and wriggle between Steve's arm and his side.

Moves down to his chest.

Hugs him.

Steve knows it's a shudder he breathes out, but doesn't really care. He reaches down, tugs the blanket up higher, and settled back against Jonathan. Comfortable. Warm. Safe.

It's like being home again. Not home with his mom and dad. Home, back in New York, with people who knew him. People who really loved him. People he desperately wants to return to.

It's home.

Jonathan's arms are home.

17. Chapter 17

No one has ever loved him before. Not like this. Not like **him**.

Hands, and legs, and fingers, and lips.

Skin.

He's skin, and muscle, and blood, and bone.

He's life, and **he** loves Steve like no one ever has before. Steve's had girlfriends, but nothing compares to how **he** treats him.

His arms around him are warm, hot, burning. But they're okay.

He's okay.

They were okay.

Forever.

He's forever.

He's dead.

Steve wakes up.

He wishes that he could have stayed asleep forever, remembering Seth's embrace. But he knows he can't. "Steve Harrington" and "lucky" are not two things commonly spoken in the same sentence without some sort of negation shoved in there somewhere.

No one will ever love him like Seth.

The arm around him doesn't belong to Seth, and even though it should be okay...it's not.

He slips carefully from Jonathan's grip, careful not to wake him, and sits in front of the window.

How long has it been since he's spoken to Seth? Since before he moved out of his parents' house. A long time. Too long. He feels a wave of regret wash over him, to think that he's forgotten about him even for a little while. He swore he was never going to forget, but...

"You'd love them." He makes sure to keep his voice low. There's no reason to wake anyone up, but he's afraid Seth won't hear him if he only speaks in his head. "They're good to me. They're...they're your kind of people."

He wonders, briefly, if Seth would have approved of him seeing Jonathan. Then, just as quickly as the thought arrives, it's dashed to the ground with the realization that if Seth were around to approve of the boy, there would be no contest. Jonathan was nothing compared to Seth, but Steve's long since stopped looking for a match.

It has been a long road, sure, but he's come to terms with fact that there will never be another Seth. "Lightning doesn't strike twice." He figures, neither does perfection.

Seth was perfection.

There's no use in wishing, hoping, but he can't help it.

Glancing back over his shoulder, one of Jonathan's hands are wiggling about on the mattress, trying to find Steve before flopping uselessly to a stop, and Steve smiles a little. He can never be Seth, but...he's good. He's good to Steve, and good to Nancy and his family. He's kind. He's strong, he...

He hurt Steve.

He owned up to it.

He's not the first person who's ever hurt him.

"I miss you."

I love you.

"I...really do. I wish you could be here."

He wakes up late the next day, stretching and tossing blankets about before he realizes he doesn't even remember falling back asleep in the bed. He remembers Jonathan coaxing him into his room, and snuggling up against him. He remembers dreaming about Seth. He remembers waking up, talking to **him**, but he doesn't remember falling back asleep.

He's willing to push it aside though.

Willing to ignore it until he gets out of bed, shuffles out to the living room, and finds a stocking nestling cozily between his and Jonathan's.

A stocking labeled, "Seth."

At first he doesn't know how to react. Stepping up close shows the letters lovingly stenciled in someone's best cursive with silver bubble paint.

This, clearly, wasn't a rushed job. Someone had gone out, bought a stocking, and made sure that Seth got as much love as the rest of them. His money is on Nancy...until he remembers that he never told her about Seth.

He runs his fingers over the paint. Feels the shape of the letters the way he used to feel the round of **his** jaw, the dip of **his** back, the...the...He doesn't even realize he's crying until arms wrap around him and a face pushes into his shoulder.

"I hope it's not bad," Jonathan whispers into his shirt. "I..just wanted to make you happy again." Steve raises a hand to wipe his eyes just as Jonathan says, "I can pack it away. We can pretend it was never even there."

"No."

The hand reaching out for the stocking freezes, just hovering inches in front of the crushed red velvet, waiting for Steve's decision. "I..." How can Steve possibly express everything he's feeling when he doesn't understand half of it? He reaches out again, touches the name

on the stocking. “He loved Christmas.”

“It’s the most wonderful time of the year.”

Steve laughs, coughs to clear the tears from his voice. “He...always made that joke too.”

“He has good taste,” Jonathan murmurs, and Steve feels him smile against his shoulder as he moves to stand closer to Steve’s back. His chest is warm against the older boy’s back.

“Jesus,” Steve laughs. “He had fucking horrible taste. Wore argyle socks everywhere.”

“He couldn’t have had bad taste.”

“You like argyle socks?”

“Not particularly.”

“He had horrible taste, man.”

“He didn’t.”

Steve laughs again, digging through his mind for various examples. **His** argyle socks. **His** Fonzie leather jacket. **He** was beautiful anyway. **He—**

“He chose you.”

Lips are on his cheek suddenly. Warm. Comforting. Steve turns and immediately is embraced by the boy standing there, looking at him with nothing but kind understanding. He can he be kind? How can he be understanding?

He can’t ask these questions however. Jonathan holds him out at arm’s length, studied him critically before assuring, “You don’t have to forget him.”

“I know.”

“You don’t ever have to forget him.” Jonathan makes it sound like a

promise. "But you have to let him go."

"I want you to stay."

"Jonathan, we've talked—"

"We can get you a job. Look around town. Find places. You can work, and help us out with bills and all that crap, okay?"

"Jo—"

"I want you to stay!"

Movement in the background catches Steve's eye. Will's clenching his hands together in a pleading motion. Nancy and Mike and the rest of the boys aren't far behind him, her eyebrows raised curiously as she examines Steve from afar. When she nods her head in encouragement, beckoning his answer, he can't help but sigh.

Really.

Where else does he have to go?

"Fine."

Suddenly he's being spun in a circle. Laughing.

"Welcome to Benny's Burgers, what can I get you today?"

Thanks to Hopper and Joyce, they managed to get Steve a job at Hopper's friend Benny's diner. The pay is shitty and he's a little tired of his classmates looking at him in shock when they see him working here, but Benny's a cool guy and gives Steve free meal, so he can't complain too much.

At least he can't anymore. Benny threatened to make him put on a frilly apron and a skirt if he complained again.

“Really, Steve?” Benny’s voice rings out behind him. “I can drive you home, it’s no problem.”

“I can walk.” Steve tries to assure the man with a grin tossed carelessly over his shoulder. “Have fun wiping down all the tables without me.”

Benny flips him off.

“Have you eaten?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“I can make you—“

“Jonathan!” The younger boy freezes. “I work for Benny. Do you really think that guy would have let me leave without eating?”

“Good point.”

Silence.

“So...”

“*Byers.*”

“I just wanted to know if you wanted to some ice cream.”

“Ice cream?”

“Goodnight, Steve.”

“Night, man.”

Silence.

Jonathan laying on his half of the bed, Steve laying on his.

Since he's chosen to sleep in Jonathan's bed Christmas night, the air mattress was packed away and Jonathan never brought it back out again.

Not that Steve is gonna argue.

Silence breaks by Jonathan clearing his throat.

Stillness broken by Steve's wiggling to find a mildly comfortable position.

Six inches of space separating them filled by Jonathan moving forward and Steve moving backwards.

"Jonathan," Steve murmurs, trying to move his friend's arms from his chest. The younger boy, unfortunately, has superhuman strength in his sleep, and Steve's efforts are useless.

Efforts.

Ha.

"Come on, man. We need to get up."

"Why?" Is the reply muffled by Steve's hair.

Steve ignores the way Jonathan's breath tickles his ear just long enough to mutter, "School is why."

"Forget school today."

They go back to sleep.

“Why is he staring at us?”

“I dunno.”

Steve gracefully flies the guy watching them the bird and tugs Jonathan into their math class, making sure his friend goes in first just in case the fists start flying.

It’s something he does—puts himself in a position to take the most damage if people were going to start being violent again.

He’s not sure how he feels about that.

“Yeah!” A shrill whisper comes from behind them in the cafeteria.
“They’re totally doing it!”

“Oh my God!” An equally shrill voice squeals before being shushed.
“How do you know?”

“Girls,” Steve snorts derisively, rolling his eyes at Jonathan, who chuckles.

“They were absent together!”

Steve chokes on his drink.

What are the chances that they’re talking about...him and Jonathan?

“Fags.”

Oh yeah, the girls had been talking about them.

“Jealous, shitbrain?” Steve asks, looking up at the idiot glaring at him from the locker across the way. No one’s around to stand up for him this time, and that makes him feel better. He’s capable of handling this shit himself, and it embarrasses him when Jonathan or Nancy try to step in. “Not getting any?”

The black eye is totally worth it.

“I’ll kill that little—that little—“

“It’s okay, Joyce,” Steve urges. “I provoked him.”

“He provoked *you* into provoking him!”

And he can’t deny it, but nevertheless he shakes his head. “I can take it.”

“But Steve—“

“Really, Joyce, it’s fine.”

She sighs.

“Fine, Steve. Have it your way.”

“Stop it.”

The way the delicate pink of embarrassment is creeping up on Jonathan’s face is from his neckline is quite interesting.

Not as much as the baby photos he’s looking at are, though.

“Cut it out, man!”

“Cut what out?” Steve asks in his most innocent tone, smiling brightly when his friend glares half heartedly in his direction.

“Staring!”

“I’m staring?”

“Yes!”

“Whoops.”

The way the delicate pink of embarrassment turns a flaming red is just as interesting.

“Seriously, knock it off!”

“Make me.”

Jonathan crawling across a bed may be the sexiest thing Steve’s ever seen before in his life, and as he makes his way over to him it becomes quite apparent that Steve’s lost the upper hand, and Jonathan’s going to make use of this fact.

His fingers are digging into Steve’s sweater, and the older boy is fairly certain his face is pink.

“Who’s blushing now?”

And now Steve’s out of breath.

“Asshole.”

“Real mature.”

18. Chapter 18

“Hey, Benny, can I steal Steve?”

“Sure, Jon, the two of you have fun.”

“Thanks.”

Steve shrugs on his jacket. “Where are we going?”

“In celebration of your first paycheck, we’re going to the movies...And you’re buying.”

“The movies?”

“The movies.”

“You *work* at the movie theatre.”

“And I never have time to see anything we play.”

Fair enough.

The town has one theatre.

All it shows are comedies, slasher films and pornos much later at night when Jonathan’s already done with his shift.

They decide on a slasher.

Is this a date? It can’t be a date. He would have told me.

“Want your own soda?” Jonathan asks.

“May as well just share a large.”

He would tell me if this is a date...wouldn’t he?

“Popcorn?”

“And a couple of twizzlers.”

“Okay.”

I...he...Is this a date?

“Front...middle...back?”

“The back. No one ever sits in the back.”

Jonathan takes his hand and leads them to a seat.

Holy shit. This is a date.

“You know an awful lot about me and my life...personal stuff. Stuff I don’t want people knowing.”

“Yeah?” The other boy just murmurs, barely looking up from the book he’s reading.

“I barely know anything about your life...you know...before I came along.”

“What do you wanna know?”

“You’ll tell me?”

“Sure.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“What happened to that girl? Leila. Why did she...do it?”

“I’ll answer any question but that one.”

“Dammit, Jonathan!” Jonathan’s too busy trying to rip the front door open while Steve uses all his weight and strength to keep it closed. He knows he shouldn’t have pushed the subject, but...Too late now. “Dammit, Jonathan, talk to me!”

“Not about that!”

“But it’s bothering you!”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I know you!”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah!”

“Since when?”

“Since you became my *best* fucking friend!”

He tries to pretend sleep isn’t difficult without Jonathan curled up next to him.

He tries to pretend that he doesn’t feel alone.

He tries to pretend that the emptiness in the pit of his stomach isn’t real.

He’s bad at pretending.

He wants Jonathan home.

It’s his own damn fault.

“I’m an idiot?”

“Yes, you are.”

Steve jumps, turns from the fridge to face the opening to the kitchen, and glares at Will.

“What do you want, kid?”

“Do you drive?”

“Haven’t lately, but yeah.”

“Go find my brother.”

Joyce’s car keys are thrown at him.

“Why don’t I know the town better?”

According to the clock, he’s been driving around aimlessly for two hours.

He doesn’t have the slightest clue where Jonathan can be.

“Why am I such an idiot?!”

But there’s no Jonathan to tell him he’s not, no Will to tell him that he is and laugh.

There’s only silence.

It’s unnerving.

“Where’s Jonathan, Steve?”

He looks up, trying not to appear as guilty as he feels.

Jonathan never came home.

And Steve’s in school instead of looking for him. He left that to Joyce.

“Steve?”

"I messed up, Nancy."

"Oh, Steve. I'm sure you didn't—"

"What happened to Leila?"

She freezes.

"Okay...maybe you *did* mess up."

"Shit."

"It'll be fine. He'll come home. He always does."

"Where is he?"

She knows.

She's not going to tell him.

"Welcome to Benny's Burgers," he calls at the sound of the bell on the door opening. "Feel free to seat yourself, I'll be with you in a moment."

And really, a second is all it takes to pass back the little order paper to the cook and rush over to the newest filled booth.

"What can I get for—"

"Steven."

"Mom?"

"A coke would be good."

"Y-yeah."

"Aren't you working? You shouldn't sit and talk if you're working."

“Benny said I could take my lunch break.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, ma. I’m sure. What...” How can he ask this politely. “What the hell are you doing here?” Yeah. That’s polite enough.

“I missed you.”

“I’m not coming home.”

“I don’t want you to.”

It’s like being stabbed in the stomach. But the agony of hearing his mother say such a thing only helps to put ice in his voice when he asks, “Then what do you want?”

“I worry about you, Steven.”

“I’m practically an adult. I don’t need you to worry.”

“But you’re my child, so I’m going to worry about you.”

“I’m going out.”

“Steven!”

“I said I’m leaving!”

“Steve!” He rolled his eyes at the sound of his father’s voice from the other room. “Don’t make me come in there.”

“Steve, honey. I know you’re almost an adult, but I’m still your mother. Okay? Be home by ten.”

“Eleven.”

“Ten-thirty.”

“Deal,” he relents.

She kissed him. “I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Seth is waiting for him outside.

Her eyes are soft, like she's his mom again instead of a woman who stopped caring about her only child. Then she realizes he's looking at her and she clears her throat. “Your father and I are leaving.”

This is not the announcement he expects.

“What?”

“We’re moving. I just...thought you should know.”

“...Thanks?”

“If...” It’s like simply being nice to her son is a struggle without her husband being the bad guy nearby. “If there’s...anything...of yours...from the house that you want—“

“I’ll call.”

“Good idea.”

Nose pressing into his back. Steve knows who it is without even having to look and rolls over to hug the other boy.

“I’m sorry,” they say at the same time.

Then neither of them say a word.

They don’t have to.

"I love you."

Steve freezes, looks up from where his lips were on the boy's shoulder.

"Seth?"

"I..." He panicked. Steve could feel him backpedaling, and hugged him tighter. This seemed to reassure him. "I...I love you."

Steve opened his mouth to respond and found no words.

So he let his actions speak louder.

"Are you at least gonna tell me where you were?"

Will, calm as can be, picks up his bowl of cereal and scurries out of the kitchen as soon as Steve speaks.

Jonathan only stares at him.

"Jon—"

"Why do you care so much?"

"You're my best friend. It's sort of in the job description."

"Christ, getting answers from that kid is like pulling teeth."

"He's just really private about some things," Nancy assures him over her chocolate milk, voice low so the kids at the table next to them can't hear them.

"Private? I told him about my dead boyfriend. I think he can trust me."

"He's just...not a talker. Calm down."

"I am calm."

“No, you’re not! Why are you so angry about this?”

“He doesn’t trust me.”

“Yes, he does. And he shouldn’t have to prove it.

“Steve?”

Steve looks up at the teacher, tries to surreptitiously cover where he’s doodling on the desk. His teacher is so pissed.

Not pissed?

He...doesn’t look pissed.

Why is he not pissed?

“Happy ‘A-.’”

“You’re shitting me.”

“Watch your language.” But the teacher still flashes him the top corner of his test with a grin. “And watch your exponents.”

“Yes sir!”

“I don’t think I need tutoring anymore.”

“What?”

“I got an A on my last test! I don’t need tutoring.”

“You got an A-, and you still need tutoring.”

“But—“

“We’re still going over simple stuff, Steve. You’re just not ready yet.”

“Oh.”

“You sure about this?”

Steve nods his head.

“I can go in with—“

“I have to do this alone.”

“I’ll be right here then, waiting.”

He nods again.

The moving truck outside his parent’s house is almost...ominous.

“Good, you’re here.” The relief in his mother’s voice is a little disarming as she ushers him inside the house. “Your father had to run to the store. Go to your room. Take what you need. I have a couple of boxes packed in there for you already. You have ten minutes.”

Ten minutes to pack up his entire life.

Challenge accepted.

All of his clothing is carefully folded in one box, his books piled in with them. A second box has an assortment of nik-naks from his childhood, so far from the front of his mind that he’s shocked to see some of them there at all. A stuffed tiger with a missing eye and frayed tail that he didn’t know he still has—his father made him throw it away when he was eight. A couple of gold pennies made in a science experiment. A G.I. Joe who happened to be a double amputee.

She’s kept it all this time.

“Steve?”

“Jonathan? I told you—“

“Your mom said you needed help moving stuff. She said your dad would be back soon.”

“She got you?”

“Yeah. You have everything you want?”

“Yeah.” And then some.

“Let’s go.”

They manage to shove four sizeable boxes into the back of Jonathan’s car before his father shows up again, and he’s left to decide what to do about his mother.

She at least deserves a thank you.

“Uh...” Her face is emotionless. She barely looks at him. “Thank you...I guess.”

She hugs him. “I will always love you, Steven.”

She’s still his mom.

“His name was Mister Orange,” Steve explains the tiger Will is holding up by the tail like the thing is diseased, and snatches it away. “You’ll rip the tail off if you do that. Thing’s falling apart enough as it is.”

Jonathan’s putting together a little trunk for him to keep all of his things in.

Will’s laughing at him about the tiger.

He doesn't mind.

"You sure you don't mind me being here anymore, Will? Because this kinda means I'm officially moving in."

"I know. That's cool with me. You're one of us now."

19. Chapter 19

Notes for the Chapter:

This is my favorite chapter by far. I think you'll all enjoy it as well ;) Some major jealous Jonathan in this chap.

WARNING: Use of the "N word" in this chapter just one time.

Thump.

"G'away."

Thump.

"Get up."

"Mmfff...no."

Thump.

"Get up!"

"I un'wanna."

Thump.

Steve peeks out from under his pillow, and finds Nancy sitting on the edge of the bed with the pillow she's currently beating him with clutched in her hands. He reaches out, and carefully pushes her off of the bed.

Her squeal is quite gratifying.

THUMP!

"OW! Nancy!"

“You pushed me!”

“You were hitting me!”

“You need to get up!”

“I’m tired!”

“Tomorrow’s Jonathan’s birthday!”

What?

“We’re going shopping!” Nancy declares, grabbing Jonathan’s keys and Steve’s hand.

“What?” He’s thoroughly startled. “Why am I shopping?”

“Because I need a pack mule, and Mike is an impatient shit.”

“Really? I’m reduced to a pack mule?”

“Just for today.”

How long has he been living with the Byers? Four months? Five months? Six? How long has he been sleeping in Jonathan’s bed with him? A month or two? Jonathan got him a home. Gave him friendship. Cared for him. And he doesn’t even know when his birthday is!

Staring at the row of birthday cards hurt.

He needs to do something better than that.

It starts off simply.

“I can’t make it to tutoring today,” Jonathan murmurs as he steps

into the math room. "I've got some stuff that I need to take care of—but we've got a test coming up, so I've set you up with Nigel. He's just as good as me in the tutoring department, so you're in good hands. Just for today."

"No problem."

He watches as Jonathan drives away at the end of the day with a promise that he'll be back in two hours to pick him up from tutoring. That's fine. Jonathan has a life away from him. So he just waits for Nigel in the library. Five minutes. Ten minutes. Fifteen minutes. Twenty minutes. When a quarter of his tutoring time lasts he starts to wonder if he should call Joyce and ask her to pick him up.

"I'll wait five more minutes."

Ten minutes later, forty minutes after his tutoring should have started, the door to the library flies open and a small dark skinned boy with wild curly hair shoots in, shouting, "I'm very sorry! I didn't mean to be late!"

The kid looks like he weighs eighty pounds sopping wet and, holy shit, he is sopping wet. He just stares for a moment as Nigel drips on the floor, shuffling closer and closer to Steve without shoes on. And—"Why do you smell like day old piss and sweat?"

Staring for a second, the boy resembles the proverbial deer caught in headlights, and suddenly he's turning an impossible bright shade of pink as he stammers, "I...uh...I was caught being in the locker room."

"Um, what?" That makes no sense. He may be ten, but he's definitely a boy. "The cheerleaders have taken to giving chocolate swirlies?"

"No. The football players."

Steve stares at the front of his pants for a second.

Definitely a boy.

"...Dare I ask what they did?"

"Towel whips, spit buckets, and two swirlies. Most unpleasant."

“Jesus Christ. Why?”

“They don’t like for me to be in the lockers. But I had to change from my gym clothes.” Nigel smiles, teeth perfectly white, a little snagged to the side. “Don’t look sad, it’s better this time than usual.”

“I’m not sad, kid.”

“But you look—“

“I’m angry.”

“Why?”

“Why the hell would they do that?”

“They don’t like for me to be in the lockers.”

“Tough shit. You go to the locker room if you want.”

“But—“

“No. Screw that. I’m tired of these shitface’s picking on everyone. Come on. You need to shower and change. Do you have any clean clothes left?”

“No. I—“

“You’ll borrow some.” He’s going to offer his own gym clothes, but he remembers they’re in a bag on the floor beside him, smelly and in desperate need of being washed. “You can use Jonathan’s. He’ll understand.”

“But I—“

Steve hauls the boy from the room, dragging him first to Jonathan’s locker where he takes the clean gym clothes and then past the football players into the locker room showers. Nigel stares at him with wide eyes the entire time, unsure exactly how to handle things.

“Go,” Steve urges. “Shower. I’ll stand watch.”

There’s that deer caught in headlights look again, but the boy only

has it for a second before he smiles and scurries off to do as Steve said. It's not two seconds after the water turns on, that two guys with scowls come over mumbling about the "nigger" using their showers again. Stepping in front of them when they move to enter the stall, Steve glowers and says, "It's occupied."

"Move it, Steve."

"Bite me."

"Nancy's not here to protect you, bitch. Move or we'll pound you—"

"I didn't know you guys were into pounding other guys."

The guy swings. It's by grace of God above alone that Steve manages to move quickly enough so that he doesn't get hit. He dodges. He doesn't know how, but he fucking *dodges*.

He does not, however, dodge the next blow, and turns sharply to the side when it connects with his cheek. But he does swing back at the guy, clocking him hard in the stomach. No matter how much he wishes it to be so, the guy doesn't double over, but neither does he continue to hit him. He just stares. Stares and gapes like he can't believe Steve had the guts to him.

Rolling his shoulders back so to appear mostly unaffected by the hit he's taken, Steve puffs his chest out like he's ready to really fight the guy. When the guy pulls back and punches him in the face Steve raises both his fists and does his best to wail on him.

He's lucky the two idiots don't gang up on him.

He's lucky the meathead doesn't go for a ball shot.

He's lucky his fist accidentally make contact with the guy's nose.

He's lucky blood gushes forward.

And he's lucky the football coach comes in before the two guys can kill him.

"The hell's going on in here?"

“He started it!”

“Hey, I’m just trying to let the kid take a shower, okay!” Steve snaps defensively the second the jock speaks. “They’re the ones who wanted to beat him up!”

“Which kid?”

“That stupid nig—“ Cutting himself off when the coach grabs his arm, the jock immediately somewhat corrects himself, “That stupid black kid with the curly hair.”

“Him again?” The coach looks like he’s going to implode, and drags the jocks out without so much as looking at Steve again. “You two numbskulls wanna get fucking expelled...”

Steve practically falls onto one of the nearby benches, reaching up to touch his lip which is only just starting to bleed less. He doesn’t care. He doesn’t care that there’s blood all over his face and shirt. All that matters is the kid will most likely be left alone now.

The boy wanders cautiously out of the showers not much later, looking for Steve like he expects him to have abandoned him. “Over here,” Steve calls quietly, and Nigel’s whole face lights up when he sees him.

Until he notices the blood.

Steven smiles through his busted lip though, waving off his worry. “I’ve had worse, kid. Nothing to worry about.”

“But this is my fault.”

“No. It’s my fault.” Steve pins him with the sternest look he can muster, and is happy to see it work. “But no way was I gonna let those morons get to you.”

The gratitude on Nigel’s face is unmistakable, and quite frankly it makes Steve feel kind of...amazing. For a second he feels needed, and it’s a welcome change from constantly being dependent on the Byers.

A glance at his watch tells him that well over an hour and a half of

his two hour tutor period has passed. There's no point in trying to get any studying done now. The kid needs to go home. Now. He's maybe a foot and a half too short and fifty pounds too light to fit into Jonathan's clothing properly, but that's okay. At least he doesn't smell anymore. Steve's done good.

"How're you getting home, Nigel?"

"I planned to take the bus."

"The bus stop is like four blocks away, and it's freezing."

"It will be all right."

"I'll call Joyce for a ride."

"No, I—"

"Just let us take you home."

"...Okay...Yeah. I am very grateful to you, Steve. It was kind of you to do this for me."

"Not a problem."

"Can I see to your face?"

Steve wants to say no, but nods his head at the hopeful look in the boy's eyes. He's as gentle as Jonathan ever was, with hands like Steve's mother, and an effervescent grin. He still looks like a ten year old, granted, but Steve is grateful for him washing away the blood, and check the severity of his split lip, and—

"What the hell?"

Practically leaping away from Steve, Nigel turns that outrageous shade of pink again. It's just Jonathan standing there, arms crossed petulantly in front of his chest, eyes narrowed into a flare. *Why the hell is he glaring?* Steve wonders, standing to walk over to him only to have him push Steve back onto the bench to look at his lip himself. Jonathan's...decidedly less gentle.

“Jonathan,” Nigel murmurs, starting to move forward but moving back when he’s glowered at. “Jonathan, gentle. He’s been hurt.”

“Yeah, I can see that. And you shouldn’t...you shouldn’t touch him like that.”

“I was just helping him clean the blood off.”

“He’s a man, he can do it himself. And that’s not all you were doing.”

“I was checking his lip—“

“Of course you were. He can do *that* himself too.”

“You’re doing the same thing, Byers,” Steve mutters, pulling his face out of Jonathan’s hand. “And at least when he did it, it didn’t hurt. The hell is up with you?”

“I got back early.”

“Doesn’t answer my question.”

“You can go, Nigel.”

The small boy is backing away until Steve reaches out and snags his arm. “We’re taking him home.”

“No way.”

“Jonathan!” Steve half glares, half stares. “What the hell, man? Nigel...can you, uh, wait in the library for a second? All my stuff’s in there.”

“Yes. Of course.” And he scurries off without a backward glance, leaving Steve and the slowly fuming Jonathan to talk privately.

“Talk,” he demands, and when Jonathan turns his head away, Steve grabs his arm. Hard. “*Talk.*”

“I just don’t want him touching you.”

Steve raises and eyebrow and scoffs, “He can touch me if he wants—innocently, I mean.”

“No, he can’t!”

“It’s my body.”

“Yeah, well...”

“Well what?”

“Steve,” Nigel’s voice calls out carefully as he steps in, the bags in his hands. “The librarian said—”

Jonathan snatches the bags away from him, snapping, “Will you just leave my boyfriend alone?”

Steve...just doesn’t know how to respond.

But Nigel does. He smiles faintly and nods his head, moving to leave the room until Steve stops him. Again. “I promised to get you a ride home. Come on. Jonathan, you’re driving. We’ll talk when we get home.”

“But—”

“Now, Byers.”

Somehow his tone convinces Jonathan to cooperate, and so they drive Nigel to his house in complete, awkward silence. And the boy leaves with little more than a thank you and a promise to have the gym clothes cleaned and returned by the next day. He leaves Steve and Jonathan alone. Steve still doesn’t know what to say.

“You boyfriend?” is what finally gushes out when Jonathan starts up the car again.

The younger boy blushes. “Shut up.”

“No. You just called me your boyfriend.”

“So?”

“Since when?”

“Since...since now.”

“What’s going on, Jonathan?” Steve asks tiredly, looking at his friend as the boy flops onto the couch.

“Nothing.”

“Liar.” Steve sits down next to him. “Talk. If I’m going to be your boyfriend, you have to talk to me.”

“I...”

“Unless you don’t want—“

“No! I...” Jonathan rubs his eyes. “I do want you to be my boyfriend. I...just expected to...you know...ask you instead of declaring it to Nigel.

“Well...” Steve shrugs. “It was kinda sexy. But you didn’t have to scare the kid like that. He’s, like, ten.”

“He’s our age.”

“So?”

Jonathan laughs. “Idiot.”

“So...you gonna tell me where you went today?”

“No.”

“Brat.”

“Stupid.”

“Bastard.”

“Asshole.”

“Please?”

Jonathan looks at him. Really looks at him. And sighs

“I was...I was visiting my dad, okay?”

“Oh.” Steve shrugs. “Why didn’t you say so?”

“You don’t get it.”

“And I won’t get it if you don’t tell me. Is he like my dad?”

“They’re a lot alike, yeah. He left us. Hurt us.” Jonathan stands, holds out a hand to Steve. “Mom’s supposed to cook dinner for my birthday tonight, but I figured I’ll just do it myself. You wanna come help me?”

Steve wants to ask more questions, but he doesn’t. He made that mistake the last time. So he smiles instead and says, “Yeah, why not?”

20. Chapter 20

“Good morning, Steve!”

“Morning, Nancy.” Steve laughs as Nancy kisses his cheek. “You’re in a great mood today.”

“Umhum.”

“Get laid last night?” It’s just a joke, but Nancy blushes bright red. She’s darting down the hallway before he can question her.

“Does Nancy have a boyfriend?”

“Huh?” Jonathan looks up from the book he’s reading, feet propped up on the desk in front of him, chair tipping back at a dangerous angle. “Not that I know of.”

“Has she ever?”

“Uh, just one. Why?”

“...Nothing.”

“Hello, Steve. I hope that you had a good night. Your lip looks much less swollen now. I hope I didn’t cause much problems for—“

“Whoa, whoa, Nigel, calm down!” Steve laughs, reaching out to grab the young man’s shoulder. “What are you so nervous about?”

“I...Why would I be nervous?”

“Because you’re afraid I’m going to hit you, slash mock you, slash hate you because of yesterday?”

“Oh, yes...that.”

"It's cool, man. Walk with me."

"Really?"

"Yeah. What class do you have?"

"Math."

It bothers him that, as it turns out, Nigel only sits one table away from him during math. He's had the entire year, and he's just noticing him now. So, when they get there, he decides to invite Nigel to sit with him and Jonathan.

"Are you sure? I would hate to intrude."

"It's fine, Nigel. Right, Jonathan?"

"Uh, yeah...sure." Brown eyes shoot up to Steve in confusion even as he speaks. "...What's fine?"

"He can sit with us?"

"Oh, right. Pull up a chair, man. I...need to apologize for yesterday."

"Come on," Steve says, looking down the hallway at the girl. She looks so happy, but then when doesn't she look happy? He can already imagine her elation at their little announcement. "Let's tell her."

"I...I don't know, Steve..."

"What do you mean you don't know? Steve laughs. "Nancy is one of your best friends. She deserves to know."

"Well, yeah...but...you know how she'll freak out—"

"It'll be a good freak out." Steve isn't laughing anymore.

“In the middle of the hallway. During class shift.”

Jonathan is rubbing his hands together, looking a little nervous and it bothers Steve. Why does he look so nervous?

“So what if she’ll freak out in the hallway? It won’t be the first time she has.”

“Yeah, but...it’ll cause a scene, Steve.”

“A scene?” What’s he getting at? “Big deal.”

“It’ll draw a crowd,” he insists rather urgently, looking like he’s going to reach out and grab Steve’s arm, but stops himself.

“So?”

“I don’t...people don’t need to know about this.”

“I’m sorry—*What?*”

They stare at each other. Brown eyes clashing against brown eyes and, just for a second, Jonathan seems to realize that something isn’t quite right. Steve can see him back-peddling. He can see him replaying the whole situation in his head to see what and when things went bad. He can see the realization dawn on him. He raises his hands defensively, and that only makes Steve angrier. Jonathan knows that he did something wrong, and now he’s going to try to explain it all away.

“Steve, that’s not what I meant.”

“What? What didn’t you mean?” Steve demands, hissing, “You don’t want people to know about us?”

“Steve—“

“What, Byers, too good to be a fag?” The words taste like acid on his tongue.

“Steve, stop—“

“Hey everyone!” Steve shouts, turning heads. “Guess what—“

Jonathan cuts him off by shoving him violently into a locker. Steve pushes back.

“Steve, cut it out!” Jonathan says sharply. “I’m just not ready! Okay?”

“They can’t know, Seth!”

“And why not?”

“I...they...they’ll freak out!”

“They know I’m gay already. It’ll—“

“No!” Steve shouts it. “It won’t be okay!”

“Yes it—“

“They don’t need to know!”

*Seth nods his head. Agrees to Steve’s terms. Kisses him even though Steve can taste the disappointment on **his** tongue.*

“Whenever you’re ready.”

“Fuck you.” It’s all Steve can manage to say as he turns and walks away. Tries to, rather, because when Jonathan realizes the gravity of what he said to Steve, he pulls him around by his arm and kisses him. Right on the lips. During class shift. Steve hears several gasps.

“Steve,” Jonathan soothes, “that’s not what I meant.”

“Tough shit.”

“Steve.”

“Fuck off.”

“Ice cream?” Steve offers.

“No. Thanks.”

“Cookies?”

“No. I’m good.”

“Monkey sex?”

“No—What?”

“I thought the monkey sex would get you.” Jonathan looks up at him, with perhaps the most pitiful expression ever, only eyeing the ice cream and cookies for a moment. “Come on, Jonathan. Don’t make me beg.”

“What is it you want?”

“I’m sorry, okay? Take the ice cream. You like vanilla.”

“Oh, and this one time Twitch showed up on a brand new spanking motorcycle—“

“His name was actually Twitch?”

“No, it was Paul. But we called him Twitch because...that’s what he used to do. All the damn time. Probably a drug user, if I’m gonna be honest.” Steve smiles and scoops some ice cream out of Jonathan’s bowl. “So, he just showed up with his bike, right? Guess how many people got on it.”

Oh, God,” Jonathan laughs. “Just telling me to guess implies it’s an impossible number.”

“A lot more than two, which is how many people the bike was meant

to fit.”

“How badly did that turn out?”

“They all wound up in the hospital with minor wounds.”

“Ouch.”

“I got it all on tape.”

“Oh, Christ. The time Susan showed up with her nipples pierced. Good catholic girl got corrupted by her bad boy boyfriend.”

“Do I really wanna hear this story?”

“So, according to her, it hurt way too much to wear a bra. And she’d known us all for years already. And we were indoors. So she thought it was okay to just lounge around with them practically poking through her shirt.”

Jonathan rubs his eyes, clearly anticipating the worst. “What happened?”

“We made a game out of trying to nail her new rings with ice cubes.”

“And you survived?”

“Then there was the time that Anthony came running into Seth’s kitchen with a six pack of beer, a milk quart full of real, genuine Russian Vodka, and a puppy.”

“A puppy?”

“A puppy.”

“You had an interesting group of friends,” Jonathan murmurs into the

silence, arms wrapped around Steve's waist.

"Yeah...I mean, they were good for a laugh, if nothing else."

"You ever miss them?"

"All the fucking time."

"Do you...prefer them over us?"

Steve only pauses for a second, shocked that Jonathan would really ask that question. "No," he whispers as he pulls him closer to him. "I don't. Like I said, they were good for a laugh, but I love you guys."

"Good." Jonathan gently kisses him. "We love you too."

"I feel like sometimes I did wrong by them."

"Oh?" Nancy murmurs over her cereal. "How do you mean?"

"I left without any warning. I...never even tried to call any of them."

"You have their numbers?"

"Committed to memory."

"So...?"

"...I see what you did there."

"Hello?"

"Anthony?"

There's a pause. A long one in which Steve wonders if he dialed the wrong number, then, "Steve? Is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me."

“Shithead, where the hell you been?”

“Indiana.”

“Downgraded, huh?”

“My parents dragged me here.”

“We miss you.”

It’s like the world climbs off his shoulders when he hears that.

“I miss you all too.”

“Steven?”

“Yes, sir?” Steve asks, looking up at the teacher. Somehow, every single time the man uses his full name, he gets a sinking feeling that he’s about to be put in front of a firing squad or something.

“A + .”

“You’re kidding.”

“Congratulations,” his teacher laughs, patting him on the back as he hands him the paper. “Looks like you’re finally catching up.”

“Hey, Nigel, wanna come over for movie-Chinese food-ice cream night?” Steve’s shocked to hear Jonathan extend the offer.

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“Not at all, man. We’d love to have you.”

“Steve, you don’t mind?”

“Of course not,” Steve laughs. “You’re our friend too.”

It still amazes him how happy Nigel looks whenever one of them says

that.

“Boo!” Steve hollers, throwing a handful of popcorn at the television screen. He laughs even as Nancy beats him with a pillow.

“Stop booing.”

“But the hot guy didn’t get the girl! The hot guy is always supposed to get the girl,” Steve complains.

“Oh, please. Even if he *did* get the girl, she’d just decide two hours later that he’s a douche bag and go for the nerd instead.”

“Jeez...girls are whores.”

The pillow beating is richly deserved.

“How many movies do you usually watch?” Nigel asks, yawning and stretching in his seat next to Nancy on the couch.

“Our record is five,” Jonathan tells him.

“Five?” He sounds shocked. “Honestly?”

“Yup. That’s why we do this at the end of the week.”

“Hello?”

“Steve?”

The voice is vaguely familiar, and it takes him several seconds to place. “Susan?”

“Steve! It is you!”

“How’d you get my number?”

“Anthony gave it to me!”

“You guys still talk?”

“Not often, but when it’s about you we do.”

“I love it when you cook.”

Watching Jonathan there with a spatula in one hand and the pancake batter in the other, Steve decides, is the best sight ever. Especially in the morning. Like, eight o’clock in the morning. Like, “why the hell am I awake?” in the morning.

“G’morning to you too. Go wake Nigel.”

“He’s asleep?”

“On the couch.”

“Aye-aye, captain.”

“Nigel, wake up,” Steve mutters, shaking the kid. “It’s time to get up.” Nothing. “Nigel?” Nothing. “Nigel?” Nothing. No matter how hard he shakes him, no matter how loudly he speaks, the boy won’t wake up. “Nigel!” He hears footsteps as someone comes out into the living room.

“Steve?” Joyce yawns

“He’s not waking up!”

A small, elegant hand reaches around his arm to touch the boy’s face.

Jonathan comes out, sees the panic on Steve’s face, and asks uneasily, “What’s going on?”

“He’s burning up.”

Steve doesn't know what to do.

"Jonathan, call an ambulance."

The hospital is not where he expects to spend his Saturday. None of them have Nigel's house number. They're there for three hours, without a word from the doctor, before they have the slightest bit of luck, and that's only thanks to Hopper.

"Hello? Is this Nigel's mother?" They all looked over at him from where he stood by the front desk. "Oh. Well, do you know where I can reach her?" He's not giving them any hints. "His dad?" Steve wants to rip his hair out. "Do you know where he lives? Okay. Okay. Thank you."

"Hopper?" Joyce looks at him curiously.

"I'll be back."

Steve feels bad.

He doesn't actually know Nigel—not well, at least. His friends and family should have been at the hospital, waiting to hear from the doctor about him. Instead, Nancy's sitting in a chair, sipping a coffee, Jonathan might be trying to flirt information out of the nurses, and Steve's staring forlornly out a window.

"Doctor!" He turns when Jonathan says frantically to the man walking at a fast pace past them without even a glance. Jonathan catches up to him and stops him. "Doctor! How's Nigel?"

"Friend or family."

"Friend."

"Then I'm afraid I can't tell you that, son."

“Hopper, have you found them?” Steve murmurs into the phone, ten seconds and one stupid doctor away from slamming his head into the wall.

“I’m at the house, no one’s answering the door.”

Is it pitiful that he wants to cry?

“They’re not telling us anything.”

“They’re not allowed to. It’s not their fault, Steve.”

“But he could be dying—“

“He’s not. I’ll call when I get new information.”

“Me too.”

He’s never hated hospitals so much in his life.

“Steve?”

Steve flinches, trying to open his eyes against the harsh light in the waiting room.

“Steve?”

Who’s saying his name?

“Steve?”

He doesn’t recognize the voice.

“I’m looking for Steve. Is anyone around here named Steve?”

“I am,” Steve murmurs, raising a hand to signal to the man in scrubs.

“Ah, good. Nigel was asking for you.”

“He’s awake?”

“He’s awake.”

21. Chapter 21

Standing outside of the ICU's door, Steve is...he's afraid to go in. It's really stupid, considering he doesn't even know what happened to the guy exactly, but he feels horribly guilty standing there. Nigel is hurt, and it's like it's all Steve's fault.

"Whenever you're ready, Steve."

He takes a deep breath.

He steps in.

Nigel is eating Jello.

He's never been so relieved.

"You're diabetic?"

"Yeah," the boy murmurs, looking shyly up at a glowering Nancy and Steve.

The girl got herself into the room by purportedly "Crying to the security guard." Steve's glad she's here.

"Don't you think that's something you should tell a guy?"

"I didn't think it was important."

"You went into a diabetic coma."

"Whoops?"

Steve wants to throttle him.

"Thank you so much for taking care of my son."

“Oh, I had nothing to do with it, Miss.”

“Nonsense. Nigel has told me about you, Steven. You have taken care of him well.”

Steve’s not blushing. He’s not.

“Well, he’s my friend. It’s kind of my job to watch out for him.”

She gives him a big hug. “Thank you.”

“I need a shake,” Nancy mutters, arms crossed tiredly in front of her. “You guys need shakes too.”

“Yeah,” Jonathan agrees.

Steve doesn’t want a shake. “I need to run. I’ll see you guys later.”

“Run?” Jonathan raises an eyebrow. “Run where?”

“Just...just run.”

“Steve?”

“I’ll see you in an hour.”

“Ew,” Nancy says with a wrinkled nose. “You’re filthy. Go take a shower before you hug me.”

“Suit yourself,” Steve winks.

And, unfortunately, the bathroom is already occupied.

By Jonathan.

Knock. Knock.

“Yeah?”

“Jonathan?”

“Oh, hey, man. Home already?”

“Just got home. Uh...when are you getting out?”

“Eventually. Had an accident at work. Paint. Everywhere.”

“I kinda smell.”

“And I’m covered in paint. I win.”

“Should I just roll around in your sheets, and stink them up too?”

“No, thanks. I’m good.”

“...Could you just get out of the shower?”

“I’m covered in paint!”

“You two can share!” was shouted from the living room, in a voice that sounds like Nancy.

“Wow,” Steve murmurs, flushing red well down his chest, clutching a towel to his waist. “You...uh...really are covered in paint, huh?”

“And you really *are* sweaty. Uh...you don’t have to come in if you don’t want to.”

“Do you want me too?”

“I-I mean—sure I do, but—only if that’s what you want too.”

“I guess it’s not like we don’t have anything we haven’t seen before,” Steve laughs calmly. He can see the steam.

It looks heavenly after running around in the cold.

“You sure about this?”

“Unless you’d like to wait an hour for the water.”

“...I’m coming in.”

“Christ, Twitch. Long time no speak. How you been?”

“Not bad.” There’s a smattering of giggles on Twitch’s side of the call, clearly in the background, but Steve can’t be bothered to ask any questions. “And you?”

“I’ve been good. It’s a lot better now than it was.”

“Your old man?”

“I moved out. I’m living with friends.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.”

“You happy there?”

“Yeah...Yeah, I really am.”

“Well...that’s good.”

“Twitch—“

“We miss you.”

“Miss you guys too.”

“Come and visit sometime...you know, if you can. We’d love to have you.”

“Steve?”

Steve can’t help but curse, looking across the room at where Will is sitting. Staring. Curiously. “Hey, Will...”

“It’s like...midnight.”

“So why aren’t you in bed?”

“I couldn’t sleep. Why aren’t *you* in bed?”

How to put this politely...? “I—look, I’ll be back soon. I promise.”

“Steve?”

“Don’t tell Jonathan unless he gets up and asks, okay?”

Getting off of the bus makes him nervous. It’s almost been a year since they’ve left the city, and while everything looks familiar, it all feels so very foreign to him.

“Steve?”

He’s not expecting anyone to come pick him up, but there is Twitch, leaning against a convertible, with a great big smile on his face.

“Hey, Twitch!”

Least. Manly. Hug. Ever.

“Nice car,” Steve comments, running a hand across the shiny red paint. “How much convincing did it take for your dad to give in?”

“You don’t even wanna know, man. After the bike accident...” Twitch shudders.

“Right.”

“So...you wanna meet the kids?”

“Kids?”

“Emma, Ethan, this is your uncle Steve. Steve, this is Emma and Ethan.”

“Hey there, guys,” Steve murmurs into the crib, wiggling his fingers at the squirming bundles of goo’s and ga’s. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Bbbbruuu.”

“You got that right, big man,” Twitch laughs at Ethan’s sound. “You got that right.”

“When the hell did you have kids?”

“They’ll be three months next week.”

“Who’s the—?”

“You remember Charlotte?”

“Yeah...no. How—“

“Condom broke.”

“Shit.”

“They’re beautiful, aren’t they?”

“Very beautiful.”

“Susan!” *Since when is she as tall as me?*

“Steve! Honey!” She nearly shouts as she tosses her arm around him.

“How are you?”

“Great,” he laughs, hugging her back. “What about you?”

“Awesome. School’s out for the week, so—ah! That’s why you’re here.”

“That’s exactly why I’m here.”

“I’m glad. We can get the gang back together.”

“My thoughts exactly.” It is, honestly, good to be back.

“Susan...when’d you get rid of the nipple rings?”

“When one of them got yanked out by a costume I wore for Halloween.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“I know, right?”

“So you’re finally dating again?” Susan asks, sipping her coffee.

“Yeah.”

“Is he cute?”

“I think he’s pretty damn cute.”

“You guys interested in—“

“We’re not having a threesome with you.” Steve can’t help but laugh.

“Can’t blame a girl for trying.”

“Well holy hell!” sounds from the sideline. “Look who manages to get Anthony and Susan *‘My nipples hurt’* Hobag in the same room together!”

The two glare at each other, and Anthony pushes his chair even further away from Susan.

“Thanks, Twitch. I just got them to stop glaring.”

“Sorry, man. I just love pushing their buttons.”

“You guys are some of the best friends I’ve ever had,” Steve says softly into the silence. “Why is this awkward?”

"It's not you, Stevey," Susan assures him. "It's just..."

"When you left," Anthony tries to start when Susan trails off. "You see...when you moved...uh..."

"Seth was our mutual friend," Twitch says, the only one who isn't afraid to bring up the subject. "When he died...it was just you. And when you left, we had no reason to stay friends."

"So...you guys don't like each other now?"

"No," Susan laughs. "We're actually kinda fine."

"Boo," Susan cries, throwing popcorn at the screen. It's an odd parallel to the movie night he'd just had with everyone back home.

Something about this is wrong though.

These are the people he's always watched movies with, but..it's not right.

"Su, stop," Twitch scolds.

"But the douche bag always gets the girls! Why can't she end up with someone nice?"

"And in the second half of the movie she comes to her senses," Steve smiles as he remembers Nancy's words.

"Thanks for letting me crash here, Anthony."

"No problem, man. It's always a pleasure to have you." Grinning, he mutters, "You clean up after yourself."

"G'night, man."

"Night."

How many times has he slept in the same house as this guy? How many times has he wished he lived with him instead of at home with his parents?

It doesn't feel right anymore.

"Ooh, he's not half bad looking," Susan says, staring at the picture Steve has of Jonathan. "Not bad at all."

"I think so too."

"How'd you meet?"

"He was my tutor."

Grinning like a madwoman, she laughs, "Student-teacher relations are naughty. Naughty, Steven."

"Christ, you're a perv."

"He treat you right?"

"He's...amazing. All of them are."

"When are you coming home?" Nancy's voice is soft over the phone. "Jonathan has been pulling his hair out."

"I'll be home soon. Before break is over—I promise."

"You could have at least warned us."

"It was a snap decision, Nance. I barely thought it out myself. Anyway, it's my money."

"But you have family to think about, Steve." Something in the tone of her voice makes Steve wince. "It's not just you anymore."

And she's right.

Was him leaving particularly cruel? He doesn't think so. He left a note explaining his whereabouts. He called as soon as he got to the city safely.

It wasn't wrong for him to leave. He needed to see his friends. He needed to make sure that everything was okay with them.

Maybe, knowing that they don't all hate him will make it easier to sleep at night.

"I missed you guys," Steve murmurs into Susan's shoulder as she tries to smother him in a hug. "A lot."

"We missed you too, Stevie."

"Yeah, man," Twitch agrees, gripping his arm. "Come back and visit any time."

"It was great seeing you again," Anthony hugs him. "Don't forget to come back for good sometime."

"I'll think about it." Steve picks up his bags and moves toward the bus, pausing just long enough to look back and say, "Maybe *you* should visit me next time."

"Sounds good."

"Cool."

He knows Jonathan is going to be upset with him when he returns, but he has hope when Jonathan's waiting at the bus terminal to pick him up. He's hopeful when Jonathan kisses him and takes his bag. But Steve gets the silent treatment the whole ride home.

Wonderful.

Notes for the Chapter:

As you can see, I gave Steve an...interesting group of friends. Don't ask me where these people came from. It just kind of happened. I didn't want to give him asshole friends since he's been put through enough in this story xD.

22. Chapter 22

Notes for the Chapter:

FINALLY THIS IS BACK. Sorry for the delay, deleted the document by mistake but I made myself sit down and rewrite it. Shorter than it was before but I'm just glad to finally update.

Thank you again everyone for the wonderful comments, kudos, bookmarks and story follows :)

"Come on, Jonathan, don't be like that," Steve murmurs into Jonathan's shoulder blade. "I'm sorry I left without telling you. But if I had talked to you first, I wouldn't have had the balls to go through with it."

"Why?"

"Because I hated to leave you."

"I wouldn't have stopped you."

"Then why are you angry?"

"Because you didn't even ask my opinion. You know, maybe I had plans for the break."

Jonathan had...planned something? "I'm really sorry, man."

"Yeah, well..." The younger man sighs and turns to face Steve, pressing their foreheads together. Steve knows then that he's won. "Let's just get some sleep."

Steve knows he shouldn't burst into Nancy's room without knocking, but he does it anyway.

"Hey, Nance—whoa!"

He's not expecting to find her making out Billy Hargrove, who he only knows from the school parking lot, in all honesty. The guy liked to drive like a maniac, blare his music and almost ran Steve over once.

"Steve!" Nancy hisses. "Don't you knock?"

"Sorry, Nance. I didn't know you, uh...had company." He nods at Billy, who's smirking. "Your parents were just pulling in the driveway when I got here, you know."

"Shit!" Nancy frantically looks at Billy. "Hide in the closet!"

Billy laughs a little. "Yeah, okay. Doll, I don't think—"

"GET IN THE CLOSET!"

"Can you love more than one person?" Steve asks quietly, half hoping Jonathan is asleep and can't hear him.

Of course he's not, though. And at the sound of Steve's voice he rolls over to face him. "Sure you can."

"Romantically, I mean. Can you love more than one person?"

"I...guess. Why?"

"I...love you." Jonathan smiles brightly and touches Steve's bright red cheek. "But I...shit, man...I love Seth."

It feels amazing it say it out loud, but the words taste bittersweet. He hadn't been able to say them to **him**. Seth had needed to hear them, so badly, but Steve never told him. "I love him."

Jonathan wraps his arms around him, murmuring, "And he loves you too. How could he not?"

"Steve, what happened?" The teacher asks, handing him a test with a bright red 'F' on it. "You were doing so well."

"Off day." Off week. Off month. Off year. But his teacher doesn't need to know that. The man doesn't even care. "I'm sorry."

"You're taking it again."

"Pardon?"

"Tomorrow. After school. Make sure you study tonight."

"...Yes sir." Maybe the man does care. Somewhat, at least.

"You know this!" Nigel scolds from across the table, pushing the calculator back over to him. "How can you make such silly mistakes?"

"I dunno."

"You *do* know, Steve. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

"Am I not your friend?"

"You are."

"Then talk to me."

Nigel wants to talk? Fine. "I wanna go back."

"Steve, what's wrong?"

"Don't tell me Nigel ratted me out."

"The I won't tell you," Nancy says, sinking down onto the couch next to him. "So talk."

“Nothing to talk about.”

“You’re failing tests again.”

“So?”

“You were doing so well. What happened?”

“I’m not perfect.”

She pauses. Unsure of herself, she says, “Who expected you to be?”

Good question.

“Steve?”

“What?”

“I’m going out.”

“Out? Where?”

There’s a moment of silence, long enough that Steve doesn’t think Jonathan will tell him anything, before the boy admits, “Cemetery. I just...need to talk to someone.”

“Want company?”

It takes Steve a moment to realize that he recognizes the cemetery with the front gate half off its hinges, and the tombstones tipped over and broken in many places. This is one of Jonathan’s friends. A suicide.

“I’m sorry.”

“What?”

Leaning over the tomb stone, Jonathan says softly, “I’m so sorry.”

"It was my fault," Jonathan admits, sitting down on the cold ground.

Carefully, Steve sits down next to him, insisting, "You can't blame yourself for this. It couldn't have been your fault."

"But it was."

"How?"

"I could have stopped it."

"No, Jonathan, you couldn't have."

"I didn't stop them." Jonathan leans into Steve's arms. "She was such a nice girl, and those group of girls were...I don't even know. They were monsters. All she needed was someone to help her, and no one did. And she killed herself. It's my fault."

"But it's not his fault," Steve grumbled to Will. "Whatever he did, or didn't do, he didn't make that girl do it."

"I know," Will agrees. "Me and mom have been telling him that since it happened. Jonathan wasn't the only one who never stepped in, but he feels like it."

"Why?"

"Because he knows what it's like to not have anyone stick up for you," Will says with a small shrug.

"Wake up, sunshine," Steve yawns, rolling over to kiss Jonathan. "Wake up."

"Mmphdunwanna."

"You have to."

Smirking in a way that Steve's never seen before, Jonathan stretches his arms above his head and murmurs, "Make it worth my while?"

"I'm not gonna let Will pour the bucket of ice water in his hands on us."

A moment of silence. "Okay. Point taken."

It's all a matter of school, really. He needs to finish before he can do anything. Three more months doesn't seem so bad. Summer would be arriving soon. Then he can go. Then he can fix everything. Until then...Steve just stares up at his teacher as he's handed the retaken test.

"A 'B + .' Much better this time."

"Thank you, sir."

"Keep it up."

"Hey fag."

It's been a long time since Steve's heard that one. A long time. Taking a moment to breathe, he turns and glares at the kid. "What?"

The fact that he responds seems to give the boy a reason to pause. Whatever he's originally going to say to Steve is forgotten, and hastily replaced with a mocking, "So you like cock?"

"Not as much as you do. Fuck off."

He finds that sometimes all you need to do is react to stop the assholes in their tracks.

"Steve, what are you doing?" Jonathan asks as Steve past him in the hall.

“The guidance counselor wants me.”

“Oh?”

“Just as confused as you are.”

He’s expecting something about the school discovering that he doesn’t live at home anymore. Or the way he’d spoken to the football player a couple of weeks ago. Or how he’s doing in his classes.

The last thing he expects is a very composed woman to look him in the eye and ask, “What are your plans for college?”

College?

He’s never really considered it an option before. He was always dumb, but...his grades have gotten better since Jonathan started tutoring him, and even better since Nigel started to help out. Even better since Steve’s started caring. “College?”

“Yes.” The woman smiles at him, leaning forward on her desk. “College.”

“But I’m...I don’t really have the money.”

Her eyes twinkle.

Like his mother’s used to.

“Not to worry, Steven. Not to worry.”

“What’re you looking at?” Jonathan asks, kissing the back of Steve’s neck.

Steve just motions to the many pamphlets littering the kitchen table. Several about specific colleges, several about programs, many about financial aid.

“College? I didn’t know you were interested.”

“Neither did I.” But the chance to actually making something of himself is too tempting to ignore.

“Do you have plans, Nance?”

“Harvard.”

“Harvard? Really?”

“Yup. For law.”

“Law, huh?”

“I’m going to be a lawyer someday. Either that or a judge. A Supreme Court judge. Wouldn’t that be cool? Maybe I’d actually get to do something in this country, make things right.”

Leaning forward, the girl gives him a quick kiss on the cheek before prancing off as she tends to do.

Steve is left staring, mouth ajar.

He had no idea.

“And you, Jonathan? Do you have any secret plans about being an astronaut, or a neurosurgeon, or a rocket scientist?”

“Hmm?” The boy looks over to him in mild confusion. “Neuroscience? God no. I’d like to go for photography, but...I don’t know yet. My plans for the future have changed a lot since starting high school.”

The only problem—well, one problem out of many—is that neither of them know what to do with their lives. So Steve, out all the possible things he can do, summons his inner Dad, and asks, “Where do you want to be in ten years?”

It’s a question that Joyce has asked him before, and he’s never been

able to answer it.

Turns out, neither can Jonathan.

23. Chapter 23

Notes for the Chapter:

The story will be coming to a close very soon, guys. Two more chapters to go after this. Thank you to everyone who's stuck by me and left comments and kudos and all that jazz. Much love xoxo.

"Welcome to Benny's Burgers." Steve smiles at the group of girls, bringing over menus. "Can I get you lovely ladies something to drink?"

He does his job as well as any other day, but his mind is clouded with thoughts about the future. He knows that this, working in a diner, serving other people is *not* what he wants to do with his life. But...what then?

Flipping through television channels, he makes several discoveries. First is that he kind of likes history. When it's taught right, it can be interesting enough to hold his attention. Second is that some of these commercials for toys and breakfast cereals are ridiculous and he wonders who the hell writes this shit. Lastly, he finds these documentaries about the human mind and the way people react to things fascinating, even more than history, and it hits him.

Psychology. He wants to learn psychology.

Nigel ends up loaning him a book about psychology to read. Granted he doesn't understand half of what he's reading, but he still spends days researching what it'll take to be a Psych Major, and what he would be learning, and how he would be learning it and the only problem he sees is that they tended to have hundred student classes.

"Check this out," Jonathan says against Steve's neck, dropping a new pamphlet in front of him. "You can go visit the school for three days

—shadow a student. Decide if you like it.”

Steve kisses him.

He finds it interesting that the school considers any trip to a college, granted you could prove that was where you went, an Excused Absence. He just goes to his school counselor, tells her his plan, and she tells the office. Next thing he knows, he’s on his way to a little college in Washington with some extra money in his pocket.

By himself.

He doesn’t think he’s ever been so nervous in his entire life.

“Steve?” He’s startled at the call of his name for a quick moment, but then he turns to smile at the man.

“You’re Cole?”

“I am. Welcome to WWU!”

He’s not sure if he’s ever seen someone smile quite so much, or quite so sincerely.

"Thanks for picking me up."

"Anything for my shadow."

"Hey Jake," Cole smiles at the young man sitting at a desk, reading a book. "This is Steve. He's the one that's going to be staying with us for a few days."

"Yeah. Whatever."

"He's studying for a test," the man explains easily, putting Steve's suitcase in one corner of the room. "So, classes start tomorrow. Anything you want to do today?"

"Uh..."

"Steve?"

"Uh..."

"Cole," Jake murmurs from across the room, an odd smirk on his face, "I think you broke him."

Overwhelmed isn't quite the word to describe how Steve feels as Cole takes him to the closest dining hall, figuring food would be good for him. He... for the first time ever he's actually, logically, coherently planning his life. How does a guy come to terms with this?

How does a guy come to terms with the fact that both college boys and girl are..."Wow."

"What?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

"This is actually really good," Steve mutters around a mouthful of roast beef. "I thought college food was supposed to suck."

"It does after a while," Cole laughs. "Eat two hamburgers a day for six months, and you'll consider being vegan."

Laughing right back at him, Steve makes sure to make eye contact before saying, "Challenge accepted."

What man doesn't love a good hamburger?

"So, what psych is this?"

"Abnormal psych."

"What exactly is that for?"

"Studying abnormalities in the brain, in the psyche. That includes pretty much everything from Down Syndrome to what may or may not make people sociopaths."

"Cool." Almost without thinking, Steve says under his breath, "Maybe then I can figure out why my dad's fucked up."

"Pardon?"

Propping his feet up on Cole's desk, he just shrugs his shoulders at the two boys watching him. "I'm just sort of... estranged from my father. He and my mom moved away just after Christmas."

"So where are you living?"

He just stares at Jake for a moment. He doesn't know him well enough to figure how he'd react to finding out he... likes other guys. So, carefully, he explains, "With some friends."

"This could pose a problem," Cole murmurs, motioning to a booklet on his desk. "Are you estranged from your mother too?"

"Yeah." He can't look at the man when he says it. "But it's not as bad with her."

"Well, could she get you financial information?"

"Probably not. Why?"

"You're probably going to have some severe difficulties getting into a college without it."

"But... it's been almost a year. I don't live with them. I'm not a minor. Can't my own financial information do the job?"

Without missing a beat Jake crosses his arms and asks, "How long have you been working?"

"A few months."

"Where?"

"At a diner."

"Do you know your credit score?"

"No."

"Have you ever taken out a loan?"

"No."

"Have you ever filed taxes?"

"No."

"Have your parents?"

He just sighs. Suddenly, he can see the problem. "What do I do?"

"I'll take you in to see someone tomorrow."

"You don't understand," Steve mutters to Jake, shifting nervously outside of the financial aid office. "My dad won't do anything to help me."

"You can't know that," Jake assures him, patting his arm. "If you guys

are really poor you'll get tons of financial aid. You won't have to pay a cent."

"Oh, trust me, my parents have money. Money isn't the issue. My dad just hates me."

"Your dad doesn't hate you. Parents don't actually hate their kids."

"No. Jake. He hates me."

"Yeah? How come?"

"I'm into dudes. Girls, too, but my dad doesn't focus on that part."

Steve could have done without the awkward silence. "I, uh...I gotta step outside."

"Yeah. Go ahead."

He spends the next five minutes mentally freaking out at himself for opening his stupid mouth. He's considering just leaving when a hand resting suddenly on his shoulder makes him jump.

It's just Jake, and the man says quietly, "You look like you're about to be sick. It's cool, Steve. I was just startled. No problem."

"So...you're cool?" Steve asks, looking over the man with concern. He hates to think Jake will spend the rest of their time together treating him oddly.

"Yeah." Even though he doesn't sound too convincing, he never sounded particularly sure about anything in the time Steve's known him, so he accepts it without question. "Just know, I'm not like...*that*, and I'm not interested."

Steve just chuckles. "I have a boyfriend."

"Good."

"Well... this is quite the predicament," the woman behind the desk murmurs, taking off her thin rimmed glasses to rub her eyes. "I hate cases like this. I... they don't come to me often, but they do."

"So what do I do?"

"Are you absolutely sure your mother can't help you?"

"...No."

"Well, talk to her if you can, and if you haven't gotten information from her by graduation, contact me at this number. Ask for Paula."

"Yes, ma'am."

"We'll find a way, Steven. I promise."

"You'll love it," Cole laughs, pulling Steve toward the door.

"Yeah, but I'm not even legal to get in yet."

"It's an alcohol free club. All you need is an ID and eighteen years."

"But I—"

"You'll love it."

Steve has to admit, the flashing lights are rather mesmerizing.

Helping Cole carry Jake back into the dorm room at the end of the night is not the way Steve plans to end his trip—especially since the club was "alcohol free", but it was worth it in the end.

He finds that, when you're around people you trust to make mature

decisions, risks usually are worth it in the end.

"Long time no see," Steve hears him whisper before he even realizes Jonathan is standing there, waiting for him to exit the bus terminal.

"Too long," Steve agrees, smiling at the way Jonathan's eyes sparkle. "How have you been holding up without m?"

Jonathan only shrugs his shoulders, and so they stand in silence. Somehow it's awkward, seeing Jonathan again after being away. And he doesn't like it, as they just stand, trying not to look at each other. He knows the younger boy is looking at him because every time he looks at Jonathan, Jonathan looks away.

"I missed you."

Steve smiles.

Ring. Riing. Riiing. Riiing.

Tapping his fingers, he grumbles, "Pick up."

Ring. Riing. Riiing. Riiing.

"Come on. Pick up the—"

"Who is this?"

Shit. What is he supposed to do when his father picks up the phone?

"Uh... Uh... Uh... Is Mrs—"

"Steven?"

Shit! He wants nothing more than to hang up right then, and pretend he never tried to call home with Jonathan staring at him from the kitchen table. Instead he takes a deep breath and says, "Yeah. It's me. Please don't hang up."

24. Chapter 24

"College?" The man sounds as dubious as Steve's ever heard him.

"Yes, sir. College. So I..." God, he's never had such an awkward conversation before. "You don't have to pay for anything," he blurts out without meaning to. "I'll handle it. But I need you to fill out FAFSA. I'll...can I mail you the form?"

"Yeah. I'll give you the address."

Almost smiling, Steve writes the address down.

"And I don't have to pay anything?"

"No, sir."

"College? Really?"

"I need to do something with my life."

"Yeah..."

Staring at the phone on the wall, Steve isn't sure he's breathing. He isn't sure he's not dreaming. He isn't sure this isn't just his brain going haywire as he dies in a fiery crash on his way back from WWU. "I..." What just happened? "Did my father just..."

"Maybe he grew up some after they moved?"

"I don't... what... was that my dad?"

"So... Washington," Jonathan murmurs as he climbs into bed, hair wet and warm from a shower.

"Yes, sir," Steve says with a smile, reaching out to pull the man into his side. "The school is great. Nice and small, so I can get help when I need it. If my dad gets the FAFSA done soon, I may even be able to get in for Fall Semester."

"Really?"

"One of the people said they'd try to pull some strings."

"Oh."

Somehow, Jonathan sounds less excited for him than he expected.

Smiling down at his report card, and the fact that his FAFSA has been filled out and sent back to him, everything seems to be going well for once. How can he not be happy when, after calling Paula, he's told to fill out the application and have it sent in by the end of the week? How can he not be happy when Nancy throws him a little "congratulations for getting your shit together" party?

How can he possibly be happy when Jonathan is giving me that look?

"Jonathan?"

"In all honesty," Jonathan whispers, voice so low Steve barely hears him. But the room was is quiet, and Steve's attention is so intense that he swears he can hear Jonathan's heartbeat. Or, maybe, it's his. "I miss you."

Smiling weakly, feeling deeply that there's something else going on here, Steve says, "I'm right here."

"Only you're not."

"What do you mean?"

"You're here, yeah-

"-So what's the problem?"

"You're not *here*."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

But the boy doesn't answer, just stands up and shakes his head, walking away from him.

"Jonathan!"

Nothing, he just keeps going. Leaving Steve sitting there, staring in confusion. Just staring until Billy slaps him on the back.

"Fuck off, Billy."

"I knew it."

A fury he isn't sure he's ever felt before bubbles up in his stomach as he turns and demands, "Knew what?"

"Fucking ass, don't even know what you're doing."

And, just like that, Steve can't make him shut up.

"Christ! Why won't you go away? " He throws his hands about in a universal sign of frustration. He looks furious at a Billy, receiving a cocky smirk in return. "Why are you such an asshole?"

"Because I have to be."

"Because you have to be," Steve scoffs.

"Because I have to be."

"What gives you the right?" Steve hisses, so angry in that one moment that he isn't shocked by his response. Sure, he isn't a hiss-

snarl-rant-rave type guy most times, but the fury burning through his veins sort of kills that thought altogether. "What the hell gives you the right to judge me? You don't know me."

"I know your kind."

"My kind?"

"Yeah." Billy's eyes narrow, the smirk never leaving his face. "Your kind."

"You mean queer."

I mean *whore*."

At first, Steve can't breathe. The word, the insult, the insinuation slams into him like a Mack truck. Then, next thing he knows, there's blood.

Somewhere between here and there he lunges at the man, fist driving straight into his nose. "You shut the fuck up!" He screams, and he knows he's screaming even as he's being pulled away from the man.

"Steve!" Jonathan says his name loudly, arms wrapped tightly around his waist. "Stop. What's going on?"

"Fucking asshole called me a whore!"

"What?" Startled, Jonathan looks at Billy. "Did you say that?"

"Oh, come on!" Billy laughs and Nancy moves between him and Steve. "Look at him. He comes here, takes you guys for granted, fucks around with you a bit, and then he just leaves."

"What?!" Steve snarls.

"Like I said. Whore."

"Who's leaving?" Steve snaps, staring at Jonathan from across the

table. He can hear Nancy shouting at Billy from the other room, and really couldn't care less about him. "Who says I'm leaving you guys?"

After a moment's hesitation, Jonathan says, "You are."

"But I'm not."

"You're... going away. And I'm taking a year off, meaning I'll be here, and Washington is at least ten hours away."

"That doesn't mean I'm leaving you."

"You... you'd still want to stay with me, while you're in school?"

Sighing, Steve moves from his chair to kneel in front of the boy. Taking his hands, he says "Of course, man. I'm yours."

"Come to New York with me."

"What?" Jonathan blinks in surprise.

"Come to the City with me. It's a three day weekend, and I... I've got some stuff I have to do," Steve sighs.

"And you want me to come?"

"Yes, is Joyce will allow it." A moment later, after a deep breath, Steve murmurs, "Nancy can even come too if she wants."

"I've never been to the City," Nancy whispers, staring out of the car window as Jonathan pulls up to a building.

"I know the perfect people to show us around." And, ringing the doorbell, Steve waits exactly ten seconds before Susan has her arms wrapped around his shoulders again. "Hey Su—"

She's hugging Jonathan before Steve can even introduce them, murmuring, "Hello there, sexy. You'll be staying with me tonight. I

promise I'll make you very comfortable."

Steve laughs so hard that he almost cries.

"Twitch, Susan, Anthony..." His heart shouldn't be pounding in my throat as he introduces the group, but it is. Somehow, it's impossibly important that his old friends love his friends as much as he does. "This is Jonathan and Nancy."

The two sides seem to measure each other up for a moment before Twitch motions for them all to sit down. "It's good to meet you," he hears Anthony murmur, shaking everyone hands.

Susan is whispering perhaps in hopes that Steve won't hear her say, "Thanks for taking care of him."

"You guys mind showing these newbies around while I go do some stuff?" Steve asks Susan with a grin, gesturing toward Jonathan and Nancy. "I should only be gone a couple of hours."

"It'd be our pleasure," Twitch says immediately, laughing maniacally at what must be outrageous plans.

"Nance, I give you permission to kick his ass if he gets out of line."

Nancy grins at him.

"See you guys later. Anthony, I'm borrowing your car."

"Yeah. Whatever."

He doesn't expect the passenger's side door to open as he's buckling his seatbelt.

"Do you... should I..." Jonathan stares nervously out at the house, unsure of what to do. "Want me to stay in the car?"

Steve wants to say no. He wants to tell him to come with him, and hold his hand, and make everything okay, but he nods his head all the same. "I'll only be a minute," he promises. "I'll be right out."

And Jonathan stays without question, but the walk to the front door takes an eternity, and a lifetime more before a tired looking woman opens up and stares for a moment.

"S-Steve?"

To be hugged is not what he's expecting, but he wraps his arms around the woman regardless, murmuring, "I'm so sorry." It was all he can say before his tongue swells and, dammit, he starts to sob. Really, earnestly sobs.

One warm, shaking hand rubs his back as the woman holds him for a long moment. It's wonderful, until she murmurs, "Steve, who's that in the car?"

"I..."

Glancing back, Jonathan looks ready to rush out of the car, and over to him.

"He..."

How is he supposed to explain that it's his boyfriend?

"Invite him inside," she says without him needing to explain. "I'll go put some cocoa on. I want to talk to him."

Shit. He nods and walks calmly over to the car, but his heart is pounding so hard he can barely breathe. "She... she wants to meet you."

"Who?"

"...Seth's mother."

"Oh shit."

"Exactly."

"What do I do?"

"You..." *Act like Seth so she doesn't think I moved on so quickly. Act differently so she doesn't think I replaced him.* "You do what you do." Because if she can't love Jonathan as he is... what did it matter?

Notes for the Chapter:

One more chapter to go you guys. I'm crying.

25. Chapter 25

Notes for the Chapter:

Here's the final chapter. Thank you to everyone who's read, commented, left kudos and bookmarked this story. I love you all <3

"So your name's Jonathan?" she asks the young man as they take their seats at her dinner table.

"Yes ma'am."

There's a silence as she put marshmallows into Steve's cup, the way he likes it. The fact that she remembers brings tears to his eyes, and hesitantly Jonathan takes his hand under the table.

Neither of them dared speak until she takes a seat of her own and sips her coffee. Neither of them have the courage to break the silence until she asks, "Is he treating you well, Steve?"

"Come in!" the woman exclaims with a smile. "Any friend of my Seth's is a son of mine!"

"Mom... he... Steve..."

"Like I said," the woman murmurs with a smile, petting Seth's cheek. "Any friend of yours is a son of mine."

"I felt so bad," Steve whispers, and the woman reaches out to grab his hand. "I... I didn't... Seth..."

"Steve," Jonathan slips his arms around him, resting his chin on his shoulder. "Don't cry, it's okay."

"It's not!" He tries to keep his voice low, but he knows he's yelling. "I abandoned him! I just... he... and I wasn't there! I wasn't there for him, and he'll never know how much he meant to me!"

"Steve, don't cry."

"It's okay, Steve," the woman leans forward and caresses his cheek. "If you feel it in your heart, then he knows."

"Steve?" the man sounds surprised, removing his jacket as he goes to give his wife a kiss. "I never thought we'd see you again."

"I..." He'd been so angry the last time Steve saw him. Furious really. "I... I should go."

"You should stay for dinner." He shakes Jonathan's hand. "It's nice to meet you, son. Steve's new boyfriend?"

"Yes, sir."

"We're going to have to have a talk, you and I."

"Sir?"

"I'd like to discuss your intentions with Steve."

The parents Steve's always wanted, treating him like a son.

Nervously he sits at the table, waiting for Jonathan and Seth's father to return to the dining room. The kindly woman of the house keeps trying to feed him to keep his mind off of things, but it doesn't work. He needs to worry.

The man's conversation with him about his intentions with Seth had involved an array of medical grade knives.

He shivers at the memory and waits, smiling when the men re-enter

the dining room laughing.

"I like you, Jonathan," the older man says. "Seth would have liked you too."

Steve feels his stomach clench.

"Don't be a stranger!" the woman says, hugging him like a mother should, whispering fiercely. "You hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I trust we'll receive invitations to your graduation?"

"If you'd like, sir."

"It was nice meeting you Jonathan."

"It was nice meeting you too, Miss."

"You two get home safe."

But they aren't heading home. Steve pulls back onto the road, and glanced out the window at the darkening sky, murmuring without looking at Jonathan, "I've got one last place to go."

"I know, man." He takes Steve's hand. "I know."

"I love you," Steve says softly, running his fingers over the delicate engraving of his name. "I love you."

He doesn't turn around at the sound of footsteps approaching.

"Steve?"

"I miss him."

Arms slips around his waist, and Jonathan rests his chin on his shoulder. Silence, just for a moment, falls upon them. Then the young man is murmuring, "Hey, Seth. It's good to meet you. Your dad said

we would have gotten along. I agree. I think we would've been good friends. Except... you were dating Steve, and... I love Steve. A lot. I just want you to know that I'm going to take care of him. I'm always going to take care of him."

Tears sting Steve's eyes, but he doesn't stop the boy from talking. He needs him to talk.

"The only person who's ever going to love him more than me is you, Seth. I know you loved him."

Steve's throat seems to swell then, a sob bubbling up wetly from his stomach. "I..."

"It's okay, man. You don't need to talk."

"I..."

"Steve..."

"The only... I... I'm always... I love Jonathan." It hurt his chest to speak those words in Seth's presence, but he needs to. "So much. I love him. But I love you too. I always will. I always have. I love you, Seth. I love you. And I'm sorry that I didn't tell you before."

"Welcome back guys," Nancy greets, walking up to them, Susan close behind her to give them both hugs. "Did you have a good day?"

"...We had a great day," Steve says, kissing both girls on the cheek. Looking over their shoulders. Jonathan's lips are against his neck. Kissing him gently as Steve turns to hug him.

Staring straight into the most beautiful color on earth, Steve breathes the words, "Just so you know...without you, I'm nothing."

And nose resting comfortably against his own, breathing the same breath as him, Jonathan doesn't even need to say a thing. His eyes do all the talking. But then he says back, "Steve, without you, there is

nothing.”